

Guilt

The therapist's Parent ego state in psychotherapy

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2/6/05

What is guilt?

Guilt is often referred to as a feeling. Technically guilt is not a feeling but a process of thinking that ends up with a feeling. The process is outlined below and the resultant feeling is either anger and/or shame. For the purpose of this article I will refer to guilt as a feeling because it is easier whilst acknowledging that technically this is not completely accurate.

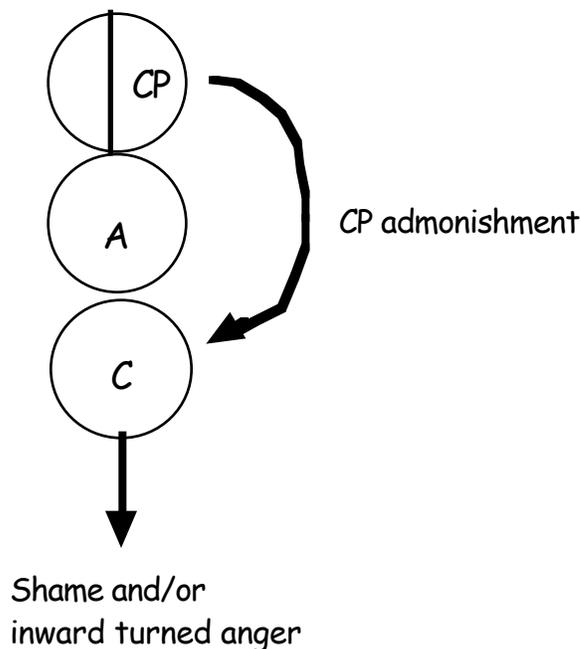


Diagram 1.

The above is the process for a person ending up feeling guilt. Some action that the person does leads to the Critical Parent (CP) speaking out to admonish, criticise, tell off, attack the individual's own internal Child ego state. The person then responds from the Child ego state in reaction to the words of the internal critic. The feelings will be either inward turned anger ("I'm angry at my self for ...") and/or feelings of shame about what they did, ("I feel shame, embarrassment, disgust at myself for...").

The feelings can either come from CC (Conforming Child) as in the case of neurotic guilt or from the FC (Free Child) as in the instance of appropriate guilt. Appropriate guilt is a natural emotion that allows society to function. There can be no society without guilt. It keeps the Free Child ego state in check and that allows society to evolve. If the Free Child wants money then he will go and take it. For a young child that may include stealing her brother's piggy bank and taking the money. If the child has been raised in a reasonably successful way then the child will feel guilt about stealing her sibling's money, As the feeling of guilt is an unpleasant one then the child in the future will tend not to do it again and thus that mini-society of the family can function. This would be considered appropriate guilt that has beneficial long term results.

Neurotic guilt is what is commonly presented by clients in the counselling session. This guilt is not appropriate for the society that the person lives in. If a person feels angry at his mother for what was unfair treatment and expresses that anger then that person may subsequently feel guilt. If this person was raised with the injunction of "Don't show your anger" then they could feel guilt after such an expression of feeling. Indeed guilt can result after the breaking of any injunction by the individual.

Why is guilt a wide spread problem?

I observed a woman the other day who had parked her car at the local shops and had a 3 year old child in the back seat of the car. The woman had alighted the car and was wanting to go about her business but the child was dawdling, taking his time and moving very slowly getting out of the car. The woman was frustrated at this and was telling him to hurry up. She then began to just walk away (in a pretend fashion) from the car leaving the child there and saying things like. "Mummy is going now and I'll leave you here." The child howled in protest and reluctantly hurried up a bit more. The mother again gestured to move away and the child eventually, reluctantly hurried up and chased after mother.

Why would this woman do such a thing? Because she has unconsciously learnt, like all parents do, that human's have a genetically inbuilt aversion to abandonment by a parent or primary carer. It does not take long for children to realise that if a parent leaves them (abandons them), then that is very frightening thing indeed (to be alone in the big wide world) and ultimately life threatening (if the parents leave then the child will eventually die as it does not yet have the Adult ego state to be able to competently look after itself with food, shelter and security.)

So this woman was in one way an amateur psychologist. She was using her observation about the genetically inbuilt fear of abandonment in children and using that fear to get her son to conform and behave in the way she wanted. This is a very effective way of getting children to conform as the fear of abandonment is very

strong in human nature. The problem is that it has unfortunate side effects for the child in later life.

A child who is subject to these kind of threats consistently in childhood can often develop a permanent fear of abandonment. So in adulthood he may form relationships where he is clingy to his partner because he fear she may leave as mother always threatened to do. And then this 'clingy' type behaviour can be a set up that 'pushes' the partner away (she feels smothered) and the partner eventually leaves the relationship. The individual can then think script things like, "It just goes to show you that people always abandon me just like mother threatened to do."

I have digressed a bit here but the purpose of the exercise is to show how some people have learnt about some of the frailties of human nature like the fear of abandonment and use them now for some particular reason. Guilt is no different. Guilt can be a strong and painful emotion that can make people modify their behaviour. Thus parents have observed human nature and learnt that they can make Jenny behave in a certain way if they can get her to feel guilty about a piece of behaviour. Thus she will avoid doing it and do other behaviour that the parent wants her to do. For instance if parents' can convince their daughter's Critical Parent that it is bad, shameful and a sin to have premarital sex then they know that the daughter is more likely to behave in a chastely manner because she will feel the pain of guilt afterwards. Thus the behaviour is modified through using the power of guilt that is naturally in all of us.

Counselling the guilt ridden client.

So it would seem that the first step in counselling such clients is for the therapist to diagnose the guilt as either neurotic guilt or appropriate guilt. The paths taken to treat either type of guilt are very different. Sometimes it is not an easy task to make such a diagnosis. Over the years of counselling parents one comes across the situation where a mother feels some guilt about going into her son Jimmy's room and through his personal stuff looking for cigarette's or marijuana whilst 13 year old Jimmy is at school.

Is this appropriate or neurotic guilt? On the one hand the mother violated her son's privacy and trust and thus the guilt is appropriate. On the other hand she was looking through his stuff because she feared he was behaving dangerously, so her actions were for his long term benefit. Does that make it OK and thus the guilt is neurotic?

In most cases the line between appropriate and neurotic guilt is a bit more clear than this scenario. With neurotic guilt the treatment plan is relatively clear. One deals with the inappropriate Critical Parent message in the clients head. For instance the message may be: "You are bad and should feel guilty for being assertive with your mother".

The counsellor brings this to the clients awareness in some way, then there may be some decontamination, followed by the making of new Parent messages about the issue of assertion and there may be some regressive work by such means as two chair redecision work.

The situation is more difficult when the client's guilt is appropriate. From what I have seen the great majority of therapists either ignore such situations or gloss over it in some way. If the guilt is appropriate then the therapist is saying from their Parent ego state: "You should feel guilty". From what I have seen very few therapists are willing to bring their own Critical Parent ego state into the counselling room. It is easy to understand why therapists are reluctant to do this. First many are trained to keep their own values out of the clients counselling session, instead they are instructed to accept the client unconditionally. Second if a therapist relates to the client from her Critical Parent ego state then that can cause considerable problems with the client's transference to the therapist. So for reasons such as these, from what I have seen, most therapists in some way avoid a clients appropriate guilt

However this raises the question of are we damaging our clients (or at least doing them a disservice) by not confronting them with their appropriate guilt. As we know all healthy people have feelings of appropriate guilt and the competent therapist would need to acknowledge this in the client.

Case examples

Number 1

I was recently dealing with a client who was having an affair and she stated to me: "I am cheating on my husband and feel guilty about it." In our society most would consider this an instance of appropriate guilt and the competent therapist has all three ego states in operation and they may say things like:

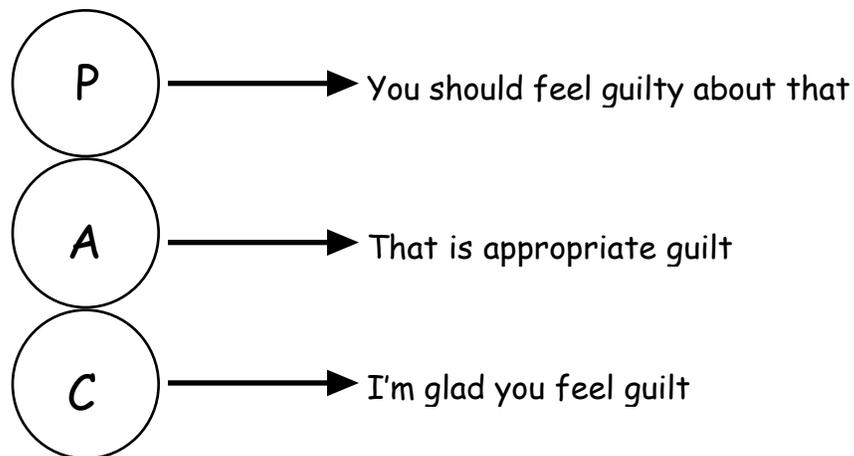


Diagram 2.

Again I would suggest that very few therapists would say such things. Most would say something like: many an affair is an unsophisticated, childlike attempt to resolve a very difficult emotional situation. The affair represents the Child ego state saying that it wants to be out of the marriage and thus the woman has a sexual relationship with another man. At the same time another part of the Child ego state says it is too frightening to be out of the marriage so I will keep it a secret. An in between solution. By saying this (ie by being understanding of the client) and omitting to say what is in diagram 2 the therapist is giving permission to the client to have an affair. It is in essence putting the client in a position where it is easier for her to feel guilt free about the affair. If she feels less guilty about that then she is in a position to more freely have further affairs and thus break the trust and monogamy contract she has with her husband.

Number 2.

A client in his mid 30s reveals that he has stolen a significant amount of money. Well over a hundred thousand dollars. He stole it from a large organisation and thus as he says it was a victimless crime. Whilst there is always a victim in cases like this there is not a clearly identifiable person as a victim.

Enough time has past now so that financial records have been destroyed and so he will never be caught for it. He was just plain lucky a detailed audit was never done. He now reports that he views himself as a thief and feels guilt about it.

How does a therapist respond to this. In our society it is appropriate guilt and thus his guilt is Free Child - a natural human reaction. So he is thinking and feeling appropriately, so there is not a contamination, an exclusion or any magical thinking involved.

What does the therapist do?. Few would bring their Parent ego state into the situation and conclude that the client's guilt was good and appropriate. By omitting to do this the therapist is giving permission to be guilt free in a situation where the guilt is appropriate. Thus the therapist is encouraging and stroking pathological behaviour. It would seem that therapists need to learn how to bring their own Parent ego state into the therapy setting whilst at the same time avoiding the negative transference effects that can result from that.

Besides this however I still had a client in front of me who was feeling guilt and was wanting to do something about that. How does one do that with appropriate guilt. What is the psychologically healthy way of dealing with it.

Is he just meant to suffer in the pain of the guilt?. Is it appropriate to pay some form of penance?. If he owned up to it and took his punishment then the guilt would probably subside. The punishment in this instance would probably be prison. He mentioned that he could donate it all anonymously to a charity and that would

alleviate the guilt. Or the other solution is simply time. As we know, over time feelings tend to subside and guilt is no different than any other feeling in this way. He could acknowledge what he has done and the resultant guilt and thus note that he will not do it again, which I believe is the solution he has taken.

I don't know what is the correct solution. I do know that he gained awareness that it was appropriate guilt and I do know that he is aware of the various courses of action that he can take. Which long term course of action he will take I will have to wait and see. It would seem that the final step in the process is for the client to contract not do the same again and then to forgive self (ie drop the guilt).

Conclusion

Australian society has a historical background that is overly repressive. As a result the majority of people in this society have an excess of neurotic guilt. This is a common scenario in the counselling required of a Transactional Analyst. There are however groups in this society where there is a lack of both neurotic and appropriate guilt. Commonly found in the criminal population or those who in some way are exploitative of others and/or their property.

Due to the wide spread influence of counselling approaches like client centred therapy, therapists' are usually very reluctant to bring their own Parent ego state into the counselling room. The idea of unconditional positive regard for the client makes it very difficult for the counsellor to state his/her Parent views about the clients behaviour. In cases of appropriate guilt this may be doing a disservice to the client and encouraging them in pathological and game like behaviour.

Note: First, many thanks go to Simon Hudson for again producing his excellent illustrations. Always eye catching and most expressive of the point in question. Second, client data has been disguised.