

How Do You Forgive Yourself For Having An Affair?

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Guilt & Shame vs. Remorse & Repentance

(An article for and from the unfaithful spouse)

Are you struggling with self-forgiveness?

Do you wonder

How do you forgive yourself for having an affair? How do I forgive myself for what I've done?

What about my overwhelming sense of guilt?

Can I feel good about myself again?

Does being "let off" for an offense seem counter-productive to you?

The word guilt is defined as "a feeling of self-reproach from believing that one has done wrong" or as many experience "a feeling of self-reproach from knowing one has done wrong."

Reproach has to do with shame and disgrace.

The word remorse has to do with deep regret, repentance and contriteness; which are healthy feelings that accompany an undistorted awareness that one has willfully or unnecessarily acted in a harmful or hurtful manner towards oneself or another person. This harmful action has violated your own (or another person's) ethical standards.

The feelings of guilt or self-loathing have primarily to do with the fact that we are focusing on the harmful act as a CHARACTER DEFECT one that cannot be corrected or worthy of forgiveness, rather than viewing the harmful act as a BEHAVIOR, which can be corrected and forgiven.

The idea that a harmful act is a CHARACTER DEFECT cripples our efforts to move beyond those negative emotions, and sheer willpower is not enough unless we truly understand this. Understanding must be rooted in cognitive awareness, not just a superficial acknowledgement that is dependant on our emotional state of mind.

The insidious thought about guilt and self-loathing is the ILLUSION that these feelings are valid. "I feel guilty and worthy of condemnation so, therefore I must be bad" and "since I'm bad, I deserve to suffer." We then sense that what we are experiencing is accurate and true, thus paralyzing us from doing much about it.

The self-deception caused by our emotional feelings keeps us stuck in an unending battle. Much of this is rooted in our upbringing, and how we were taught growing up or from some religious training.

Many were told that they SHOULD feel bad or guilty for doing this or that, or for saying mean things, or for acting in certain ways, or for treating others harshly or poorly. This was a sign to others that we were sorry for what we did, or that we acknowledged our mistake, or that we are demonstrating sorrow for how we acted.

How many times have we heard from our parents (usually our mom) something like this "tell her you are sorry, you SHOULD FEEL ASHAMED of yourself?" or "Don't you FEEL BAD for what you just did?", or "You are a bad boy/girl for ..." or "Don't act like you did nothing wrong, you should feel horrible for what just took place."

The religious community will ask you to do certain acts of self-punishment as atonement for poor actions, thoughts or words. The school system (when it actually enforced any acts of discipline) would make us write on the board 50 - 100 times, "I will not talk in class" or some other reasonable facsimile. Our sports team coach would make us run extra laps for missing the shot or taking a bad penalty (especially if that error prevented victory.)

These levels of punishment or FEELING BAD about what we have done has lead us to the belief that in order to receive forgiveness, we HAVE to feel bad enough for a period of time and/or be punished.

The “FEELING BAD” for what we’ve done or the “PENANCE” we need to do has taught us to believe that in order to receive any forgiveness or pardon from another person for a wrong we committed we will need to feel a certain level of shame, guilt or self-anger. The “proof,” of our acceptance and responsibility for the hurt or harm we caused someone else, is only demonstrated by our level of self-abhorrence and self-punishment.

This is also very true when it comes to our level of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness for actions we have committed. We think that we need to feel a certain way (usually negative) for a certain amount of time to prove to ourselves that we are truly sorry for what we have done.

The question is: How bad and for how long?

Now if we actually set a time limit or a degree of self-punishment for our offence, most would be freed from the burden that we are carrying around. We would be free to really love ourselves. We would be free to truly love those around us. We would be free to live life again. We would be free to really enjoy life, family, marriage, intimacy and sex.

If we don’t set a time or degree, and if we don’t clearly understand the proper way to deal with our harmful and hurtful behaviors – separating BEHAVIORS from CHARACTER- then we enter into a viscous cycle or vortex that we can’t escape because of the – I did bad, therefore I must feel bad, therefore I am bad, which leads to feeling bad, which verifies the belief that I am bad, so I will continue to feel bad, and so the story goes. Like a dog chasing his tail, never being able to catch up to it, to do something about it.

This cycle perpetuates a negative belief that I am INHERENTLY wrong or DEFICIENT in some way, and as the saying goes, “a leopard can’t change his spots,” so to, I MUST be flawed and unable to correct myself.

Many of us were not taught the notion of repentance or regret; which has its roots based in actions or behaviors. Both ACTIONS and BEHAVIORS are correctable, and they avoid personal character attacks. Actions and behaviors warrant personal responsibility, whereas character deficiencies tend to eliminate one from taking steps to resolve harmful acts because “that is who I am.”

When we are remorseful for our harmful acts, we are going to do something about it. Remorsefulness leads us to behavior changes, which is repentance. Remorse will prevent us from being stuck and helps us to separate behavior from character.

If we find ourselves stuck, it is because we are still trying to feel bad enough about ourselves (self-focused on our CHARACTER) before we can move forward, which is just a self-perpetuating downward spiral into shame and guilt. We are not focusing on changing our behavior, or separating behavior from character.

Usually one or more of these three things are going on with us, which keeps us feeling that false sense of guilt, depression, shame or anxiety.

1. Because of my bad behavior, I am inferior or worthless. (depression)
2. If others found out about what I did, they would look down on me. (shame)
3. I’m in danger of retaliation or punishment. (anxiety)

Which of these three – depression, shame or anxiety – am I dealing with?

So, the answer to how do you forgive yourself for having an affair, and overcome the self-loathing, the invalid guilt, the self-defeating shame and the inability to forgive oneself, is ... one needs first to recognize the cognitive distortions that we tell ourselves, and secondly, one needs to properly deal with each of these. Changing how we think changes how we feel.

Change occurs once you recognize that the hurtful act(s) is a BEHAVIOR that can be modified, reshaped and corrected and NOT a character flaw. When one truly believes this, the paralyzing grip of shame or guilt can be broken. Only then will

you know the answer to the question: How do you forgive yourself for having an affair? (or for anything else, for that matter).

Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt (self attack & punishment) less personally. Take responsibility for your choice of how you are feeling, and then act like a hero and not a victim.

Forgiveness is the reasonable alternative to hurt, anger, suffering and shame.

Forgiveness shows that we are not victims of our past actions or behaviors.

Forgiveness of ourselves allows us to help those around us that we love. We can only really help and love others after we have helped and loved ourselves. "Place the oxygen mask on yourself first before assisting others" is the rule to safely navigate a crisis.

Self-forgiveness proves that we really love others, especially our family.