

Coping with guilt: Activity 1

Here are some of the trauma-related issues Patrick explored with his counsellor:

(You can answer the **same questions** in your notebook, as they relate to your trauma. Answer as honestly and as bluntly as you can – this is **for your eyes only!**)

- INTENTION: What was my intention in being there?

Patrick's answer: *'I was just doing my job; I tried to do the guy a good turn by letting him on; I intended to get everyone home safely.'*

- APPREHENSION: Did you have mixed emotions about it beforehand?

Patrick's answer: *'I was tired – it was late in the day . . . when he started to get on and I could smell the alcohol on him . . . I got uneasy that there might be trouble.'*

- What OUTCOME did you honestly expect?

Patrick: *'I thought I had handled things well by keeping silent through his insults. I thought he had calmed down a bit and that it was all clear when he got off the bus.'*

- How much POWER are you attributing to yourself in the situation?

Patrick: *'I have eight years of experience as a driver . . . I'm supposed to know how to handle situations like this...I expected myself to do better.'*

- Are you GUILTY for surviving and wanting your life to go on? (Yes or No)
Explain.

Patrick: *'Yes! I want to forget about it and I can't . . . I just wanted that guy to disappear off my bus and I didn't care what happened to him . . . I felt relieved when he got off . . . that was careless and heartless.'*

- Are you PUNISHING yourself out of guilt? (Yes or No)

Patrick: *'Yes, I guess I am . . . I think I messed up and I don't deserve to be let off the hook . . . every time I relax for a minute, and try to feel normal, I think it's not okay to laugh a bit or to feel content.'*

Reading over your answers to the previous guilt-related questions can help you to begin to separate **facts** (what actually happened) from **feelings** (your ongoing reactions). Ask yourself if you are being overly responsible, and if you should assign at least a portion of the responsibility to others involved? Out of 100, how big a percentage would that be, for example, 50/50?, 70/30?, and so on. Are you

using a judgemental double-standard, being much harder on yourself than on someone else who was part of your trauma experience? If so, treat yourself with some compassion.

Coping with guilt: Activity 2

The purpose of this activity is to help you examine your guilty thoughts and potentially reinterpret them in a balanced way. **Stop** if you become overly distressed. You can do a bit more later. Make five or six columns for your answers so that you can add material later.

Example from a traumatic situation in a sports stadium:

Two friends attended a rugby game together, a thunderstorm occurred, the crowd got unruly and one of the friends fell and hit her head, resulting in a serious concussion. The other friend was plagued by guilt.

Column 1: ‘What I thought was going to happen’:

'I expected that we would be at the game laughing, cheering, having snacks, feeling exhilarated and going home together.'

Pause after describing just the content of your expectations.

Column 2: Write, in shortened form, what happened:

'She was pushed by the crowd, fell and hit her head.'

Pause again after describing just the facts, as they occurred.

As you can see, this activity is attempting to help you separate your emotional reactions from the factual content of what actually happened, to assist you in becoming more objective, rather than overwhelmed by guilt.

Column 3: Is there something, however small, about which you can accept that you did the best you could? Don't deny any positive actions or belittle your efforts.

'I called for help.'

Identify any small piece of positive action that you can and **accept** it.

Column 4: What portion or ‘piece’ of your guilt can you let go?

‘I am only responsible for half of this – the weather was responsible for some of it – the crowd was responsible too.’

Column 5: Can you now reinterpret or rename some of the emotions that may go beyond guilt into sadness or other feelings? Try to identify these.

‘I feel remorseful . . . uncomfortable . . . sad . . . regretful.’

Can you put your feelings of guilt to the side now, so that they are not ‘in your face’ all the time? Re-read these notebook entries to help you find a better balance. Make a statement about the present, such as *‘I approve of how I’m acting in this moment.’* (Activities such as meditation and mindfulness training can help you focus on the present.) Try to feel good in the here and now. Guilt is *not* a badge of dishonour. You’re not ‘marked’.