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A theoretical review of constructive and destructive forms of guilt

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Abstract. Guilt is a complex moral and emotional experience that plays a significant role in the regulation of human behavior and social interaction. While guilt is often perceived as a negative emotional state, contemporary psychological research emphasizes its dual nature, highlighting both constructive and destructive forms. This article provides a theoretical review of guilt as a psychological phenomenon, analyzes its functions, and differentiates between constructive and destructive forms of guilt. Special attention is given to the psychological mechanisms, developmental origins, and behavioral consequences of each form, as well as their implications for mental health and personal development.

Keywords: guilt, moral emotions, constructive guilt, destructive guilt, self-regulation, personality development

Guilt is traditionally defined as an emotional response arising from the perception that one has violated internalized moral standards or social norms. As a self-conscious emotion, guilt requires the capacity for self-reflection, evaluation of one's actions, and awareness of responsibility toward others. In psychological theory, guilt has been examined within psychoanalytic, cognitive, social, and humanistic frameworks, each emphasizing different aspects of its origin and function.

Despite its generally negative emotional tone, guilt is not inherently pathological. Modern psychology increasingly recognizes that guilt can serve adaptive functions, promoting moral behavior, empathy, and social cohesion. At the same time, excessive or distorted guilt may become destructive, contributing to emotional distress and psychological disorders. Therefore, distinguishing between constructive and destructive forms of guilt is essential for understanding its role in personality development and mental health.

Guilt belongs to the category of moral or social emotions, alongside shame, pride, and empathy. It emerges through socialization and internalization of norms and values, often developing in childhood through interactions with caregivers and significant others. According to psychoanalytic theory, guilt is closely related to the superego and arises from internal conflicts between instinctual desires and moral prohibitions. Cognitive approaches, in contrast, emphasize the role of appraisal processes, in which individuals evaluate their behavior in relation to personal standards. Functionally, guilt serves several important purposes. It motivates reparative actions, such as apology or compensation, helps regulate antisocial behavior, and strengthens interpersonal relationships by signaling concern for others. However, these functions are realized primarily when guilt takes a constructive form.

Constructive guilt, also referred to as adaptive or healthy guilt, is characterized by its proportionality, situational relevance, and behavioral



orientation. It arises in response to real moral transgressions and is focused on specific actions rather than on the global evaluation of the self. One of the key features of constructive guilt is its motivational role. It encourages individuals to take responsibility, correct mistakes, and restore social harmony. For example, feeling guilty after causing harm to another person may lead to sincere apology, prosocial behavior, and improved moral awareness. In this sense, guilt contributes to personal growth and ethical development.

Moreover, constructive guilt is closely linked to empathy and moral sensitivity. Individuals experiencing this form of guilt are able to recognize the impact of their actions on others without engaging in excessive self-condemnation. As a result, constructive guilt supports emotional regulation, moral learning, and the development of mature interpersonal relationships.

Destructive guilt, also known as maladaptive or neurotic guilt, differs fundamentally in its psychological structure and consequences. It is often disproportionate, generalized, or disconnected from actual wrongdoing. This form of guilt may arise from unrealistic moral standards, excessive parental control, or internalized criticism. Unlike constructive guilt, destructive guilt is typically self-focused rather than action-focused. Individuals experiencing destructive guilt tend to perceive themselves as fundamentally flawed or unworthy, which may lead to chronic self-blame, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. In extreme cases, destructive guilt is associated with obsessive-compulsive tendencies, psychosomatic disorders, and learned helplessness. Another important characteristic of destructive guilt is its paralyzing effect on behavior. Instead of motivating constructive change, it often leads to avoidance, emotional withdrawal, or self-punishment. Thus, destructive guilt undermines psychological well-being and interferes with adaptive coping strategies.

The distinction between constructive and destructive guilt can be summarized across several dimensions. Constructive guilt is situational, temporary, and behavior-oriented, whereas destructive guilt is chronic, diffuse, and self-oriented. While constructive guilt supports moral responsibility and social adaptation, destructive guilt contributes to emotional dysregulation and psychological maladjustment. From a developmental perspective, constructive guilt emerges in environments that combine clear moral guidance with emotional support and acceptance. In contrast, destructive guilt is more likely to develop in contexts characterized by conditional acceptance, excessive punishment, or unrealistic expectations. This highlights the importance of early socialization in shaping the emotional experience of guilt.

Understanding the dual nature of guilt has important implications for psychological counseling and psychotherapy. Therapeutic interventions often aim to transform destructive guilt into a more constructive form by promoting self-compassion, realistic moral evaluation, and differentiation between behavior and self-worth.



In educational and preventive contexts, fostering constructive guilt can support moral development and social responsibility, while reducing the risk of guilt-related psychological distress. Therefore, guilt should not be eliminated but rather regulated and integrated into a healthy emotional system.

Guilt is a multifaceted emotional phenomenon with both constructive and destructive potential. While constructive guilt plays a crucial role in moral regulation, empathy, and personal growth, destructive guilt poses significant risks to mental health and well-being. A theoretical understanding of these two forms allows for a more nuanced perspective on guilt, emphasizing its adaptive value while acknowledging its possible pathological manifestations. Further research is needed to explore cultural, developmental, and individual differences in the experience of guilt and its regulation.

