

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY NOT SHAMING YOUR FRIENDS

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/keeping-your-sanity-by-not-shaming-your-friends/>

Guilt and shame are two different emotions,

with very different consequences. Understanding this can make the difference between flourishing and disaster.

Turn on the TV or radio news and commentary, read most any columnist or even just regular news stories, listen to any politician, and you'll see a clear pattern of communication. Those who agree with the speaker/writer are good people, smart people, caring people, wise people.

Those who disagree are bad people, stupid people, heartless people, ignorant people. Even evil people.

These are not conversations to search for truth, to solve problems, or to discover answers. They aren't even conversations to identify mistakes, bad choices, or blind spots.

They are designed to shame those with a different point of view.

But the capacity to listen, really listen, to other points of view – especially those that we don't naturally agree with – is what makes it possible to understand each other, recognize our own blind spots, and grow wiser as people. This doesn't mean we need to agree; it just means that we're open to listen and give other ideas a chance to be expressed.

Aristotle said, "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it."

Shame stops that process cold. It ends communication, and inspires us to withdraw, lash out, and make those with different points of view into the enemy.

For many years psychological research tended to use guilt and shame interchangeably, which made it hard to see the very different qualities of each. But we know a lot more about those differences now, and they are

substantial.

Guilt can actually help us to become better people.

We feel guilt about specific actions or thoughts that go against our values, or the values of the culture in which we live. When we've done something that hurts someone else, or violates a trust, or conflicts with our own idea of the person we want to be, we feel guilty about that action or thought.

A major function of our self-concept is to provide an idea of the kind of person we want to be. Guilt is one of the emotions that lets us know that we're off the mark, that we need to make some adjustments to our behavior, so that we can continue becoming the person we want to be.

Guilt leads us toward problem solving. It's an emotion that's centered on specific, definable actions that can let us know what we might do to correct our mistakes, and/or what we could do differently in the future to avoid repeating them.

When we feel guilty, we also feel more empathy for people we may have hurt, we feel more energized and engaged in problem solving. If we feel angry, we tend to be more constructive with our anger, diffusing it or expressing it in a way that can help to resolve things.

Guilt is associated with accepting responsibility. Shame, on the other hand, compels us to *avoid* responsibility, and makes us worse people.

Shame is a more primitive emotion than guilt. The withdrawal and submission that are often an expression of feelings of shame are useful in more primitive animals to diffuse conflict and hostility. And it's the primary response to having done something wrong when we're very young.

Guilt is a more sophisticated emotion that involves more complex thinking and problem solving. It doesn't really gel until we're around 8 years old. Before that, the most common emotion when we've done something hurtful or against the rules, is shame.

With guilt, we feel bad about something that *we've done*. With shame, we feel bad about *who we are*.

We can usually do something about a specific hurtful action or destructive thought. But if we feel that we are fundamentally bad as a person, the solution – if we look at it clearly – would be to become a different person. And that's an impossible solution – and that binds us stuck.

All the negative consequences from shame – and they are significant – flow from this essentially helpless and miserable self-assessment, and the emotions, thoughts, and stories that go along with it.

We ruminate, we spin our internal wheels trying to find a way to minimize the awful feeling. We look for other people we might blame, we lash out at them, sometimes violently, trying to protect ourselves from the excruciating and immovable shame.

Because we feel helpless to do anything about the shame, we avoid facing what we've done. We avoid awareness of how we may be affecting other people, so we feel less empathy toward the very people we may be hurting.

Guilt can help us to become better people, giving us emotional feedback that we're not living up to who we want to be. Shame makes us worse people: we withdraw, deny, lose empathy, blame others, and hurt them – and ourselves – with our anger.

Now, just as there are times when physical violence is justified, as in self-defense, there may also be times when shame is justified, as in condemning immoral abuses of power. Even in such cases, it's important to understand that shaming someone will not move them in the direction of becoming a better person.

*So here we come to the practical point of this: The use of shame to try and influence, change, or “correct” our friends, family members, or members of our community with whom we disagree is worse than useless. It pushes the whole process of dialogue, curiosity and discovery in reverse.*

There are many politicians and other public figures who should be ashamed of themselves for the actions they take, the directions they aim the use of force that we the people entrust them with.

But our friends, family members, and members of our community who hold different opinions will not change, grow, or become better people through our treating them as though they are bad people at their core. And neither will we become better people for doing it.

We are currently in a time where many of us have forgotten how to be gracious and curious, and it's harming our ability to learn from one another. We shout at each other, gossip about each other, cancel each other. Nobody learns or grows from this, we just continue escalating into more and more shame.

We can begin by remembering that, unless we are actually in a position of power, when we disagree with a friend about a political opinion, we're having a philosophical discussion about ideas, not determining the fate of the world – or even our neighborhood.

If we are in a position of power, it's all the more important to listen to opposing views, because they may just hold that little piece of the truth that makes the differences between a benevolent act, or a harmful one.

But shouting at each other or cancelling each other – or watching other people shouting at or cancelling each other on TV – is not about learning, or growth, or even about effective communication. It's about shame. And it's about time we weaned ourselves of it.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the workbook for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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