

Question: How can I get over feeling so guilty all the time? I've made mistakes, but I'm not really a bad person. This really gets me down at times.

It is not uncommon to find a connection between guilt and depression. When a person feels he/she has failed or done something wrong, guilt can arise along with self-condemnation and hopelessness. Guilt comes before depression in most cases, but sometimes depression causes people to feel guilty because they are unable to "snap out" of the feelings of despair.

Let's begin by trying to understand the difference between guilt and guilt feelings. Real guilt is the result of real sins we have committed. People may or may not feel guilty for the wrongs they have done. Some *should* feel guilty but do not.

On the other hand, guilt feelings are the uncomfortable, subjective feelings of regret and shame. These feelings are a kind of emotional and spiritual warning system. Much like physical pain, these symptoms should cause a person to examine himself to see if there is a real problem that needs to be corrected. However, some people have such a sensitive conscience that they feel guilty when they have done no actual wrong.

The first step is to try to determine the source of these guilt feelings. This may require a person to search not only his or her past actions but also internal thoughts. If you follow this procedure and find actual guilt, face it honestly. Confess the sin and make any corrections that are needed. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

After dealing with any real guilt, work on replacing any remaining negative guilt feelings with positive thinking. The Bible says: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). One way to put this into practice is to write helpful Bible verses on index cards that you can have with you at anytime. To overcome anxiety and fill your heart with the peace of God, I suggest that you look up Bible verses about God's gracious love and forgiveness (Ex.: Psalm 103:2-4, 11-12; Romans 8:31, 35-39; Ephesians 2:4-5, 8; 1 John 1:9; Hebrews 8:12). Read these verses when you start thinking negatively.

In addition, it is helpful to find a trustworthy Christian mentor with whom you can openly discuss feelings and problems. Ask this friend to pray with you and help you check out your feelings in a more objective way. He or she can help you deal with issues of real guilt and give encouragement as needed. There is much more that can be said about this problem, but I believe this is some of what Jesus would say.

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