Guilt and shame are not the same. Understanding the differences between them can help us work through our negative self-judgments.

When we are better able to grasp the difference between healthy guilt, unhealthy guilt, and shame, we can begin to halt self-criticism and reject shame messages.

Guilt is often experienced when we act against our values. Shame, on the other hand, is a deeply-held belief about our unworthiness as a person.

Here’s a way to visualize it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HELPFUL GUILT</th>
<th>UNHELPFUL GUILT</th>
<th>SHAME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFINITION</strong></td>
<td>Helpful guilt is a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done that is objectively wrong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris hit someone while driving drunk and feels guilty.</td>
<td>Unhelpful guilt is a feeling of psychological discomfort about something we’ve done against our irrationally high standards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat forgot a coworker’s name and feels terribly guilty about it.</td>
<td>Shame is an intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXAMPLE</strong></td>
<td>Helpful guilt is caused by actions or behaviors that break objective definitions of right and wrong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can experience guilt as early as age 3-6. (Developmentally, guilt is a more mature emotion than shame.)</td>
<td>Unhelpful guilt is caused by actions or behaviors that break irrationally high standards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We act in a way that breaks objective standards of moral behavior.</td>
<td>Shame is caused by an innate sense of being worthless or inherently defective.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHEN IT DEVELOPS</strong></td>
<td>We can experience guilt as early as age 3-6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We act in a way that breaks irrational standards of behavior developed early in childhood to please an adult.</td>
<td>We can experience shame as early as 15 months. (That’s why shame is more deeply wired in our brain and is more difficult to reverse.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHY WE FEEL THIS</strong></td>
<td>We see ourselves as unworthy and deeply flawed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GUILT vs SHAME

OUTCOME

Potentially positive.
Healthy guilt allows us to seek forgiveness and correct a wrong. It can lead to healing.

Resolution

Healthy guilt resolves as we repair the damage we caused.

How to work with

Face the behavior that hurt self and others.
Take responsibility for the harm done.
Seek forgiveness from the person affected.
Change destructive behavior and attitudes that created the harm.
Reclaim wholeness and heal relationship with the person affected.

Outcome

Negative.
Unhealthy guilt leads us to emphasize self-punishment over behavior change, trapping us in guilt.

Resolution

Unhealthy guilt remains until we correct irrational beliefs.

How to work with

Separate and resolve healthy guilt to uncover unhealthy guilt.
Practice self-compassion and work to understand that everyone possesses a combination of strengths and weaknesses.
Seek connection with others. Joining a self-help group can offer support.

Negative.
Shame causes us to fear that we will be rejected, so it tempts us to disconnect from others and avoid what causes us shame.
It could even start us down a path of deeper mental health problems like depression and substance abuse.

Exercise self-compassion to shift feelings of shame and move awareness away from self-criticism or proof of inadequacy.
Pursue relationships. Nurture connections and a sense of belonging with others.

Shame is internalized and deeply connected to our sense of who we are which makes it more difficult to resolve.