Guilt serves as both an indicator and inhibitor of wrongdoing. Healthy guilt is an appropriate response to harming another and is resolved through atonement, such as making amends, apologizing, or accepting punishment. Unhealthy guilt, sometimes called neurotic or debilitating guilt, is a pervasive sense of responsibility for others’ pain that is not resolved, despite efforts to atone. Healthy guilt inspires a person to behave in the best interests of him- or herself and others and make amends when any wrong is done. Unhealthy guilt stifles a person’s natural expression of self and prohibits intimacy with others.

Unhealthy guilt can be instilled when a child is continually barraged with shaming statements that criticize the child’s self, rather than focusing on the specific harmful behavior. A statement such as, “It is wrong to take someone else’s things without permission—please return my book,” creates an appropriate awareness in the child of healthy guilt for doing wrong. Saying, “Give me my book back! I can’t trust you with anything!” shames the child, declaring that he or she is by nature untrustworthy and will never be better than a thief, regardless of future behavior. Consequently, the child sees his or her identity as defective, and may feel powerless to atone for any wrongdoings. This identity can be carried into adulthood, creating a sense of debilitating guilt.

An important difference between shame and guilt is that in the former, a person does not feel he could have avoided the action; in guilt, he feels responsible. Guilt can be used to manipulate someone into behaving in a certain way. This is known as a “guilt trip.” Provoking another’s sense of guilt in order to obtain something that he or she might not otherwise have offered is a manipulation of internal motivations. If a woman tells her husband that she is going out for the evening with her girlfriends, and her husband responds, “Go ahead and go to the movie, dear . . . don’t worry about me . . . I’ll be fine here all by myself in this big old house all evening with nothing to do . . .” the wife will be made to feel guilty for her husband’s loneliness. If the guilt trip is heavy, the wife may decide to stay home with the husband, even though she really wants to go to the movie.

It is appropriate to let people know when they have unnecessarily or intentionally hurt others, or have ignored their responsibilities to others. This will instill fair guilt that will help a person be less hurtful in the future.

Although conclusive studies have yet to be conducted, it is likely that the sense of guilt changes along with a person’s cognitive and social development. These stages have yet to be thoroughly documented and are still open to critique.

Guilt can be deactivated, the conscience “turned off.” Some people never seem to develop a healthy sense of guilt in the first place, through a failure to develop empathy or a lack of appropriate limits, while others choose to turn theirs off. Guilt can be deactivated in two different ways:

1) The person convinces him- or herself that the act was not a violation of what is right.

2) The person reasons that he or she has no control over the events of life and is therefore not responsible for the outcome. With no sense of personal responsibility, there can be no sense of guilt.

When guilt is reduced, internal limits on behavior disappear and people can act without remorse.

See also Moral development; Self-conscious emotions

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Further Reading

Edwin Ray Guthrie

1886-1959
American psychologist primarily noted for his work in evolving a simple theory of learning.

Edwin Guthrie, born Jan. 9, 1886, in Lincoln, Nebraska, was one of five children. His mother was a schoolteacher, and his father a store manager. He received a bachelor’s and a master’s degree from the University of Nebraska, specializing in mathematics, philosophy, and psychology. He entered the University of Pennsylvania as a Harrison fellow, receiving his doctorate in 1912. His educational training and background reflect his analytical frame of reference in his psychological writings.
Edwin Ray Guthrie taught high school mathematics for five years in Lincoln and Philadelphia. In 1914 he joined the University of Washington as an instructor in the department of philosophy, changing to the department of psychology five years later. During his rise to full professor in 1928, he developed his learning theory in association with Stevenson Smith, who was then department chairman of psychology at Washington.

Guthrie married Helen MacDonald of Berkeley, Calif., in June 1920. They traveled widely, and in France Guthrie met Pierre Janet, whose Principles of Psychotherapy he translated with his wife. Janet’s writing had a great influence on Guthrie’s thinking. To Janet’s descriptive psychology and physiological concepts as sources of action, Guthrie added an objective theory of learning.

In the latter part of the 1920s Guthrie concerned himself with such topics as fusion on nonmusical intervals, measurement of introversion and extroversion, and purpose and mechanism in psychology. He seemed more inclined toward the exploration of learning in the 1930s and thereafter.

Much honored, Guthrie was elected president of the American Psychological Association. During World War II he was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army, serving as a consultant to the overseas branch of the general staff of the War Department and Office of War Information. He was made dean of the graduate school at the University of Washington in 1943.

Guthrie was considered a behaviorist. Behaviorism was a school of psychology which felt that psychology as a science must be predicated on a study of what is observable. Behaviorists excluded self-observation as a scientific method of investigation and preferred experimentation. They examined the concept of association and its limits in explaining how learning takes place. Guthrie’s interpretations in his writings are based on the theory of learning: “A combination of stimuli which has accompanied a movement will on its recurrence tend to be followed by that movement.”

In his theory Guthrie avoids mention of drives, successive repetitions, rewards, or punishment. He refers to stimuli and movement in combination. There is one type of learning: the same principle which applies for learning in one instance also applies for learning in all instances. The difference seen in learning does not arise from there being different kinds of learning but rather from different kinds of situations.

See also Learning theory

Further Reading
Bugelski, Bergen Richard. The psychology of learning. 1956.