

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Dealing with Guilt and Regret (continued)

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Dealing with Guilt and Regret ... (continued)

In last month's newsletter we looked at the topic of guilt and regret and some of the factors that contribute to our developing these emotions. This month I would like to look at our experiencing guilt and regret and what I previously described as "counterfactual thinking." As you'll recall, counterfactual thinking represents a comparison between something that has actually happened and an alternative outcome that one can imagine, frequently made up of one's imagining a behavior that has been changed from what actually occurred and the effect that this would have had on the outcome of the event. A "counterfactual" may imagine an outcome that is better or worse than what actually happened. An example might be imagining that one had taken an alternative route to work and therefore would not have been involved in a traffic jam or perhaps even a traffic accident. Or perhaps if one's home were destroyed in a fire, she might take the opposite position that if only she had been at home she might have put it out, or if she had been home she might have been killed. As you can see, the types of counterfactual that we develop can play a significant role in how we view life and its events.

Last month we looked at why we tend to develop these counterfactuals in certain situations but not in others. Developing counterfactuals might be to help make sense of our world and to explain negative unexpected events, close calls, or even unexpected behaviors by others. The results of exploring and entertaining these counterfactuals can vary. If you tend to imagine a negative event where something happened but you are now imagining how it could have been worse, then you may tend to have a more positive feeling about the actual event. Dealing with these counterfactual thoughts may also help us to differentiate true guilt from false guilt and shame, which we discussed last month; and it may also help us to make better decisions and choices in the future. Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind regarding counterfactuals is the way that they may change the subjective experience of an event and influence our understanding regarding the causes of that event.

One of the more difficult things for all of us to accept is that, while we may be able to influence people and events in our life, rarely are we able to totally control those events or their outcomes. Frequently, when we are rolling around in our head the various scenarios that make up our counterfactual imaginings, we tend to give to ourselves a greater sense of control than is perhaps warranted. This seems particularly true when we imagine better outcomes than what actually occurred. For example, if someone runs a stop sign and slams into the side of someone's car, he may develop a sense of guilt in questioning why he wasn't more alert in approaching the intersection, why he didn't slow down more in approaching that intersection as he was taught in driver's education class, or even why didn't he get out of bed five minutes sooner to leave so that this would have never happened. This can create a sense of false guilt and potentially make him miserable for the rest of the day. He may carry it one step further and begin to tell himself what a bad driver he is, or even what a stupid person he might be, which can then add feelings of shame to guilt. Conversely, he may focus on the fact that he bought a car that does well in collisions, and that he is just thankful no one was hurt, as it could have been much worse. As you can see, the type of counterfactual that we develop may play a significant role in the way it affects us emotionally.

Does Imagining Different Outcomes Provide Benefits?

Being able to imagine different outcomes related to both past, present, or even future events, serves a number of functions. It may assist the individual in coping in his daily life. Imagining a situation as a challenge or as an opportunity rather than a threat helps it to feel more manageable, and it allows the individual to make better decisions rather than feeling paralyzed by fear. Occasionally the "what if" may allow one to look at alternatives for making a given situation better. This also allows one to regain a sense of mastery in one's life after a given trauma or negative event. For example, the old adage that if one falls off a horse you need to get right back on only works if one can imagine more positive results the second time on the horse. If the only thing one can picture is getting thrown off again, then chances are pretty good that will happen. But if you can imagine the many times that you have ridden and not been thrown off, or if you can even imagine when you were thrown off how something had happened that you could change to prevent that from happening again, then your chances of success will go up.



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By now, it should be evident that imagining counterfactuals, whether it be a "what might have been" or an "if only I had done something different," can have either a positive or negative effect on our emotional well-being. If one remains stuck in the past and focused primarily on his mistakes, then he will be constantly emotionally bruised from beating himself up. In countering these negative counterfactuals, it must be remembered that the most obvious "what might have been" is not always the best outcome nor is it the same as "what ought to have been." But there also can be positive results coming out of regret and guilt.

True guilt serves as a warning signal with regard to our behavior. False guilt, as mentioned previously, simply serves to make us miserable. And true guilt does not have to lead to shame about who we are, but hopefully it motivates us to change our behavior so that we do not repeat the same mistakes. Regret, when used appropriately, can help us to examine past behaviors so that we can make better decisions and act accordingly in the future. If used appropriately, regret can actually mobilize us to act in more appropriate and effective ways in the future. Tom Paxton once wrote, "It's all right to look back as long as you don't stare." If we look back at where we've been and what we've done, even though there may be some feelings of regret and guilt, but try to learn from these mistakes and make positive changes, then these emotions can serve positive functions in helping us to become better individuals. But dwelling in the land of guilt and regret as a place to live and not just visit can be damaging emotionally, physically, and spiritually.



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