

UNITED WISDOM

Shame and guilt: a verdict on yourself or a response to an action

The Person and the Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I14 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

“shame dwells in the eyes”.

A proverb quoted by Aristotle in Rhetoric II.6, in W. Rhys Roberts's translation.

What this article is about

You answered someone close sharply. Later you recall the conversation and hear two different continuations: “I caused pain; I need to understand what can be repaired,” and “After this, nobody should have anything to do with me.” They may appear almost simultaneously. In the first, the other person, the event, and a next step are still visible. In the second, your whole life shrinks into one piece of evidence that you are unworthy. Understanding the difference helps even if calling one experience guilt and the other shame is not yet possible.

This article invites you to consider where attention goes: to an action's consequences, your image in other people's eyes, an imposed judgement, or an actual duty. We will not infer character from a feeling. You can feel ashamed without causing harm, feel guilt beyond your responsibility, and acknowledge a serious action while retaining the right to dignified treatment. Relief matters, but so does the ability to act in a way that prevents care for yourself from concealing what happened to someone else.

I. Two sentences open different tasks

“I acted badly” leaves room to clarify: what exactly did I do, under what circumstances, whom did it harm, and what is possible now? “I am bad” seems shorter and more persuasive but is difficult to examine. It can spread from one conversation to your profession, parenting, friendship, and right to be around people. To work with a specific situation, it helps to restore a verb: shouted, failed to keep a promise, shared someone else's information, or left without warning. This language makes consequences and the limits of an action visible, although it does not remove pain by itself.

Consider a hypothetical scene: an employee delivered a document late, costing a colleague time. “Nobody can work with me” easily leads to a general argument about personality. A more definite description creates another task: report the delay, acknowledge the difficulty, agree a new deadline, and examine the cause of the failure. Perhaps the promise was unrealistic;

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

perhaps the person stayed silent despite already knowing there was a problem. These differences matter. Equally heavy feelings do not mean equal responsibility or automatically suggest the same repair.

This working distinction is not a test that sorts every feeling accurately. In lived experience, judgements mix, and words carry personal and cultural histories. If another name fits you better, you can keep it while asking where attention is directed. Is the present need a conversation about harm, a revision of a commitment, protection from humiliation, or support for a state that has become too difficult? Each task has its own actions. A universal demand to “stop feeling ashamed” can be as unhelpful as an instruction to prove regret constantly.

II. The strength of a feeling does not establish the size of a wrong

An inner experience can be louder than the event itself. Someone recalls mixing up a name at a meeting for a long time although the other person calmly corrected them. Someone else feels little after an action that seriously harmed another's interests. Emotional intensity therefore cannot be the only measure of moral responsibility. The feeling deserves attention, but facts need separate consideration. Strong shame does not imply that you did something irreparable. If you lack the expected pain, that does not remove the duty to consider consequences.

Imagine a mother declining another school organizing task. She deceived nobody and broke no agreement but hears inside: “A good mother always participates.” Here it matters to examine the duty itself. Who established it? Was there consent? What resources does she have? Refusing a new assignment differs from refusing to fulfil a promise already accepted. Talking about these circumstances helps examine the actual situation without first requiring you to convince yourself that the feeling has disappeared. A boundary can remain reasonable even with unpleasant feelings afterwards.

Consider another example: a manager reports incorrect information and says they do not feel guilty. Assessing consequences requires correcting the information and finding out who relied on it. A lack of feeling does not remove this work. In both examples, one sequence helps: first the event, agreements, and possible harm, then how someone experiences what happened. This is an editorial orientation for reflection rather than a legal judgement. Complex professional or legal situations need appropriately qualified people and actual documents that this article has not seen.

III. Whose eyes become an inner court?

In Rhetoric II.6, Aristotle connects shame with the opinions of people who matter to someone. This is a historical discussion of influencing listeners rather than a contemporary psychotherapeutic model. It offers a useful question: whom am I mentally standing before? Yet the chapter's norms also include judgements about poverty, status, and experienced violence that this article cannot accept. We therefore take the question about an audience without adopting the entire list of reasons for shame. A source's antiquity does not make every moral premise correct.

An imagined audience sometimes consists of real people: parents, a manager, friends, or acquaintances in a community. Sometimes it is a composite voice to which you could never present a sufficiently good result. Try naming it more definitely. Whose judgement did you hear? What did that person actually say? What did you add? This examination does not require rejecting everyone's opinions. It helps distinguish a message you can work with from an endlessly expanding assumption about what everyone now thinks. A specific conversation needs a specific party.

Public shame can also be real: you were mocked, private information was published, or a mistake was used to humiliate you. Changing your own perspective alone is insufficient here. Questions about boundaries, information protection, and acceptable treatment are needed. Acknowledging your action does not give others the right to any form of punishment. Conversely, unpleasant criticism is not always humiliation: it may convey consequences you need to hear. Consider its content, form, and context. You can acknowledge the fair part of a message while separately stating that an insult or threat is unacceptable.

IV. A judgement you receive does not always belong to you

“You should be ashamed” sometimes appears when someone else did not get what they wanted. You failed to answer at night, give money, or agree with a family decision. Establishing responsibility requires examining whether you had the relevant duty and ability to fulfil it. Another's disappointment is a fact about their experience; it does not yet establish your wrongdoing. Be particularly careful with accusations that require giving up safety, rest, or your own consent. Someone can feel ashamed in a situation where protection of their boundary is what they need more.

Suppose an adult son changes plans and does not attend a family celebration. If he promised help, it makes sense to report the change and discuss consequences. This does not require accepting “you never loved us.” He can respond to the specific part: “I understand you will have to find someone else; I warned you late.” He can also keep the general judgement separate: the relationship requires a broader conversation than one missed visit. Such clarity

cannot guarantee a calm family reaction but helps avoid merging every question into a single accusation.

If a judgement occurs in a relationship involving control, threats, or violence, a practice from an article may be insufficient. You do not need to earn an end to harm through a perfect confession of guilt. Seek accessible, safe support, considering contact conditions and local services. The article cannot determine a particular relationship's character from one phrase. It identifies a principle: safety and consent cannot become rewards for obedience. An unpleasant feeling does not require staying where your boundaries are systematically violated or an immediate threat exists.

V. Guilt can have a specific address

If you did cause harm, easing your own condition should not become the only goal. Try naming the person or undertaking affected by the action. What became harder for someone else? What did they lose? Which consequences do you know, and which do you only imagine? Such questions sometimes return attention from your own image to actual relationships. But caution is needed: do not write someone else's feelings for them or make them describe pain in detail so that you can become convinced of its seriousness. You can ask and tolerate an incomplete answer.

In a hypothetical scene, you told a mutual acquaintance something a friend shared privately. “I am a terrible friend” may accurately describe your current experience, but it does not itself limit the information's spread. Available actions are more concrete: stop discussing it, acknowledge what you did, ask what form of repair is needed, and respect a wish not to discuss it now. You cannot promise to restore complete privacy when information has travelled further. Honest acknowledgement of the limit is more useful than a grand promise that again makes someone depend on an unreliable word.

Sometimes the person is unavailable, does not want contact, or a conversation would be unsafe. Responsibility then does not require an intrusion for your own relief. You can change subsequent behaviour, correct information in an appropriate channel, compensate harm through a suitable process, or seek qualified advice. It matters not to present your decision as complete reconciliation: the other party may disagree or never learn of the change. Yet action remains possible. It need not end in a beautiful scene of forgiveness to matter. Your regret and another's right to maintain distance can coexist.

VI. An apology does not purchase a right to forgiveness

Simplicity and precision help an apology. Name the action and its consequences within what you know. Do not immediately add a demand that the person confirm you are good. When an apology ends with “you are not angry anymore, are you?”, its recipient may be assigned the additional work of caring for your condition. Sometimes people close to each other want to offer reassurance; this is not forbidden. But freedom to respond matters. The other person may accept the words, ask for time, disagree with the explanation, or choose to continue the relationship differently.

Explaining circumstances is possible if it helps clarify the event and the future plan. Fatigue, overload, or a misunderstood task may be significant factors. Yet describing them should not quietly replace acknowledgement: “I was struggling” and “you had to bear the consequences” can both be true. A late employee, for example, can explain taking on an unmanageable volume and propose a clear process change. Their difficulties then connect with preventing repetition. If instead these words demand cancellation of someone else's inconvenience, the conversation loses precision.

Not every apology needs to be public. If harm was public, correcting information in the relevant place may be appropriate; if it was private, a broad confession can merely expose someone else's information. Choose the action's scale according to the event and the affected person's wishes. You need not tell an audience every detail to prove sincerity. Work, data protection, or substantial damage may involve separate procedures. Using them does not replace human attentiveness, but it prevents repair from depending entirely on intense personal emotion and impressive words.

VII. Self-punishment is easily confused with repair

After an error, you may want to give up rest, a pleasant meeting, or good food. It seems that while you suffer, the event is remembered and responsibility preserved. But ask which consequences this deprivation changes. If a friend needs corrected information, your loss of sleep will not correct it. If a colleague awaits a document, endless self-accusation may make preparing it harder. This does not mean commanding the feeling to disappear. It concerns choosing an action alongside it: does the action direct resources towards necessary work or merely maintain a severe image of repentance?

Imagine someone making a harsh remark to a child. All evening, they repeat that they have no right to call themselves a good parent and avoid conversation from shame. The child remains with the episode and an unexplained distance. A more available action could be calmly acknowledging the words, explaining that the child need not care for the adult's feelings, and changing the conditions of the next conversation. This scene cannot produce universal

parenting advice or promise restoration. But it shows a difference: self-punishment centres on the adult's image, while repair also turns towards the child's needs.

Permission to sleep, eat, and receive support is not cancellation of responsibility. Many tasks require preserved energy. If the experience continually returns, becomes unbearable, or substantially disrupts life, it helps to discuss it with an appropriate professional. Thoughts of self-harm call for urgent local help. Reading must not encourage deprivation as proof of morality. You can be responsible while acknowledging: I currently do not know how to handle this pain and need help so that it does not become further harm to myself and others.

VIII. Repair has a limit and a continuation

Some consequences are reversible: money can be returned, an incorrect record clarified, or a promised part of work completed. Others have already happened and will not disappear through the next action. Honest responsibility considers the difference. In the first case, a specific deadline and result help. In the second, acknowledge the limit, offer available support to the affected person, and change future behaviour. Do not announce that everything is repaired merely because you did what was possible. Yet repeating one gesture endlessly does not necessarily help either. Distinguish a completed task from an ongoing relationship with the event.

If you agreed to send a corrected document by Friday and did so, that fact can be acknowledged as completed. Trust may recover more slowly; a colleague may check subsequent deadlines. This is another part of the process. “I must never make another mistake” creates a promise a person can hardly fulfil. It is more honest to name a way of handling future failures: warn earlier, clarify volume, and revise a deadline together. Trust can rely on observable behaviour without a guarantee of perfection. Such continuation takes time rather than one particularly persuasive speech.

It is better to identify repair's limits through actual agreements, capacities, and the parties' rights. If someone demands humiliating, dangerous, or far-reaching actions beyond the event, acknowledging your conduct does not oblige agreement. If you want to finish the discussion too quickly, check whether you heard the consequences and fulfilled what was agreed. The balance is not always obvious. Neutral, qualified help may be useful with complex harm or conflict. This article cannot establish fair compensation; it proposes replacing that question neither with permanent guilt nor with hurried self-justification.

IX. Research into feelings does not make them a simple table

June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, and Debra Mashek's review Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior considers differences between shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Only the publisher's open abstract is used here: it confirms the field of inquiry rather than allowing every conclusion to be retold. Our question about judging the self or an action remains an editorial working distinction. We do not call all guilt useful or all shame destructive, infer a future action from a feeling, or prescribe a psychological approach from a few words.

In life, an experience can change function. At first, shame may help you notice crossing a boundary that matters to you. Later, it may close conversation and turn into constant anticipation of exposure. Guilt may prompt clarification of responsibility or spread to everything you failed to prevent. To understand what is happening now, consider consequences as well as names: does a definite action emerge, does avoidance increase, and can you still hear the other person? These questions establish no diagnosis and require no choice of a single emotion.

Cultural and personal context also matters. In one place, discussion of shame relates mainly to family reputation; elsewhere, to the body, professional competence, or a broken promise. Someone may use “guilt” for an experience that another would name differently. A conversation is better begun with a specific scene than by correcting someone else's vocabulary. You can clarify a word respectfully: “When you talk about this, what frightens you most?” The answer helps identify the task without making knowledge of terms a condition for human participation or substituting a ready-made scheme for experience.

X. Responsibility can be shared without being limitless

Within a team, someone may take on an entire failure because confessing first feels easier. But the event may depend on several decisions, insufficient resources, and unclear authority. Examining your part is necessary; assigning yourself every cause is another task. A project error, for example, relates both to your incorrect calculation and to a missing check assigned to a separate process. Both parts can be named. Mentioning an organizational circumstance is not necessarily self-excusing. It helps correct conditions when used precisely and without hiding your own action.

There is also guilt over another's suffering that you could not prevent. Someone thinks “I should have realized,” although they did not have today's information then. Here it helps to distinguish knowledge in hindsight from information available when deciding. This is no automatic release from every omission. Sometimes signs were noticeable, sometimes possibilities limited, and sometimes responsibility shared. Difficult histories need support and

careful examination of facts. An article has no right confidently to declare a reader guilty or innocent from one painful thought.

If you belong to a group whose actions caused harm, separate questions may concern participation, benefit, solidarity, and changing rules. They should not be reduced to personal self-abasement or “I did nothing.” Different situations require different facts. You can support changes in conditions even without directly participating in the event; you can acknowledge your specific role without calling yourself the sole cause. Responsibility becomes clearer when it has a level and an address. Moral seriousness is not measured by the amount of guilt you can carry daily.

XI. Dignified treatment remains possible in a difficult conversation

Someone who acted badly may need restrictions, consequences, and restorative work. This is compatible with protection from humiliation and preservation of basic needs. Dignity is not a reward for error-free behaviour. At the same time, respectful language does not require the affected person to become gentle immediately or resume closeness. They have a right to their feelings and boundaries. A difficult conversation may involve two people whose needs currently differ. Respect helps see both without turning either into a means of easing the other's condition.

When listening to an admission, ask what help the person seeks: understanding the event, preparing an apology, bearing consequences, or support for their condition. Do not rush to excuse them or pronounce a final judgement. You can be present without knowing all the facts. “I cannot decide whether the other person should forgive you, but I will help you think about the next step” leaves your role clear. Sometimes a qualified mediator or professional is needed. Friendship matters, but it does not make a friend a judge, doctor, or compulsory keeper of every difficult story.

If the admission is yours, choose a safe recipient and suitable scope. Not everyone handles personal information well, and not every audience should receive it. A private discussion of your condition differs from communication needed to repair harm. You can seek support separately without disclosing someone else's details. This matters especially when a story involves third parties. Maintaining respect for them is also part of responsibility. Honesty does not require uncontrolled publicity; it requires avoiding deception where actual decisions and relationships depend on your words.

XII. From a general verdict to the next honest step

Return to the opening scene of a sharp reply. Perhaps the first step is conversation; perhaps the situation needs settling and a later return by agreement. You can say: “I spoke sharply. I want to understand what happened and discuss how to avoid repeating it.” If the other person is not ready, consider that circumstance. You do not need a perfect admission to begin answering for an action. But it helps to notice when statements about your own badness occupy the entire conversation again. They can conceal the question of what the event now requires.

The feeling may remain after a reasonable action. This does not automatically mean too little was done or another punishment is needed. Sometimes time, support, or professional discussion is required; sometimes a factual part remains unresolved. A concrete question helps distinguish these: what exactly still needs doing, and on what grounds? If there is no answer, do not create a new obligation merely to feel that you suffer enough. Nor declare yourself entirely free of consequences if an agreement remains unfulfilled. Clarity grows through actions and information rather than a final judgement of personality.

You can remember an action without making it your only name. Other decisions, relationships, and possibilities for change remain in life. This does not erase what happened or force another to forgive. It preserves the capacity for continuing moral work: noticing harm, clarifying your share, repairing what is possible, accepting limits, and seeking support. This approach does not make someone flawless. It gives them a more specific way to answer for a life in which dignity and responsibility need not destroy each other.

What this means in practice

Choose one moderately difficult, nonurgent situation. Do not begin with your most painful history or use the exercise when immediate danger or self-harm risk exists. Such circumstances call for accessible local help. You can stop the practice if it noticeably worsens your condition.

Write the event in one sentence with a verb: what you did or failed to do. Separately record a general judgement if it arises: “I am unreliable” or “everything is wrong with me.” Do not immediately argue with it; simply notice that it is another type of statement. Name two known facts about consequences and leave the unknown unknown. Do not invent someone else's feelings to complete the note.

Check the basis of responsibility: was there a promise, your duty, available information, or a possibility of choosing? Identify your part and one circumstance requiring clarification. If you see no wrongdoing but only someone else's disapproval, a possible step is a conversation

about a boundary or support for the feeling. This is not yet a final conclusion about the whole situation.

If harm occurred, choose an available action: correct information, fulfil an agreement, propose compensation, or prepare a short apology. Respect another's right to distance and the safety of contact. Do not promise a result you cannot control, such as immediate forgiveness or complete restoration of trust. For substantial damage, use appropriate qualified help.

End with the question: “Which part of the task does this action actually change?” If the answer is clear, identify a real next step and reasonable deadline. If not, ask for help clarifying. You can then put the note aside and return to ordinary needs. The practice's result is a more precise description and direction of action rather than an obligation immediately to stop feeling shame or guilt.

Key quotation

> *“those whose opinion of us matters to us”.*
>
> *Aristotle, Rhetoric II.6, an excerpt from W. Rhys Roberts's translation. It raises a question about a significant audience rather than endorsing every historical norm in the chapter.*

Connections between traditions

Approach	Useful question	Limit
Aristotle, Rhetoric II.6	Before whose gaze does shame arise?	Historical judgements about status and violence are not adopted; this is not a clinical model
Moral-emotion research, Tangney and colleagues' review	How are shame, guilt, and embarrassment distinguished?	The open abstract was read; detailed review conclusions are not claimed
UW editorial question	What did I do, whom did it harm, and what can be changed?	A working distinction cannot diagnose or determine compensation
Respectful conversation	How can responsibility and both parties' boundaries be maintained?	An apology does not require forgiveness or resumed closeness

Sources

1. Aristotle, Rhetoric, Book II, Part6, translated by W. Rhys Roberts. An ancient philosopher; we use the discussion of shame and a significant audience. The translator is the historical classical scholar named by the edition. This is no contemporary health study; discriminatory and victim-blaming premises in the chapter are rejected.

2. June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, Debra J. Mashek. Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior. Annual Review of Psychology58, 2007, 345–372. The publisher's open abstract and metadata were read. Psychology and social-science researchers; publication affiliations are George Mason University and Harvey Mudd College. Detailed results and therapeutic conclusions are not attributed to the unread full text.

3. NIMH: My Mental Health — Do I Need Help?, revised2025. A US federal research institute. Used only for the boundary of help with substantial difficulties or urgent risk; local routes differ.

Tags

shame, guilt, dignity, responsibility, apology, boundaries, moral emotions, action, feeling, wrongdoing, judgment, repair, forgiveness, self-punishment, conversation, support, embarrassment, Aristotle, Rhetoric, Tangney, NIMH, consent, closeness, compensation, unknowns

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki