

Cards for Living Study Guide

How to Handle Wrongdoing

An illustrated guide for deeper understanding and better living



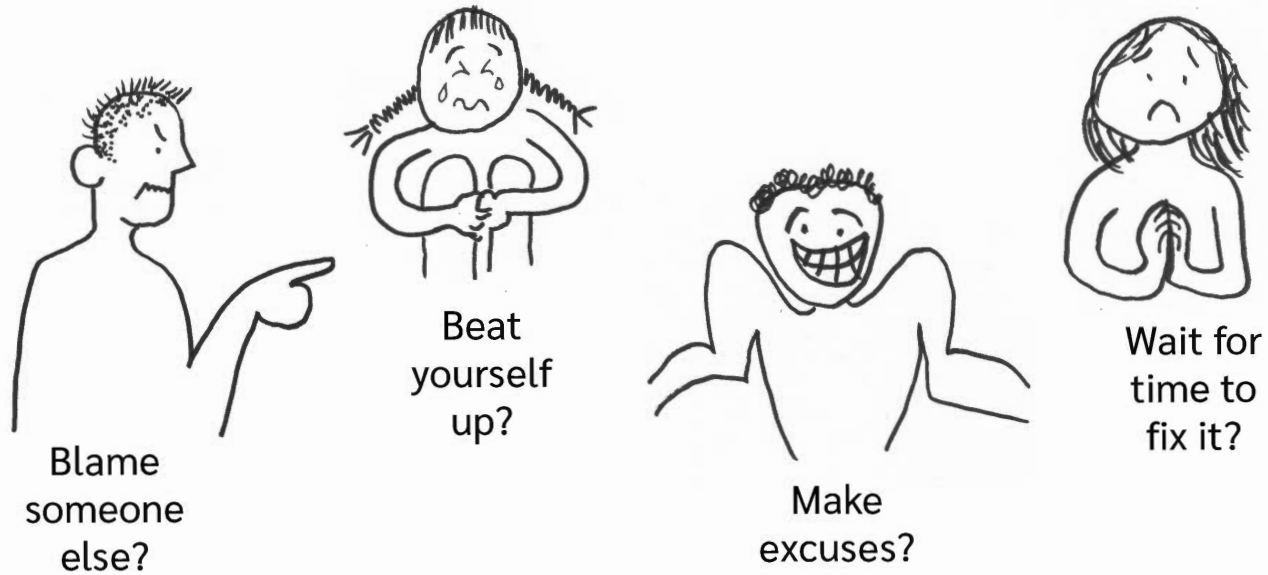
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Introduction

When you do wrong, what do you do?



All human beings have things we feel legitimately guilty about — things we did that we know better than, things below our personal heartfelt standards, things that caused someone else a pain or a problem. Whether the repercussions are large or small, these incidents disturb our connection with others, and our own peace of mind. And we only make things worse if we don't deal with what happened, and don't properly address and fix the problems we caused.

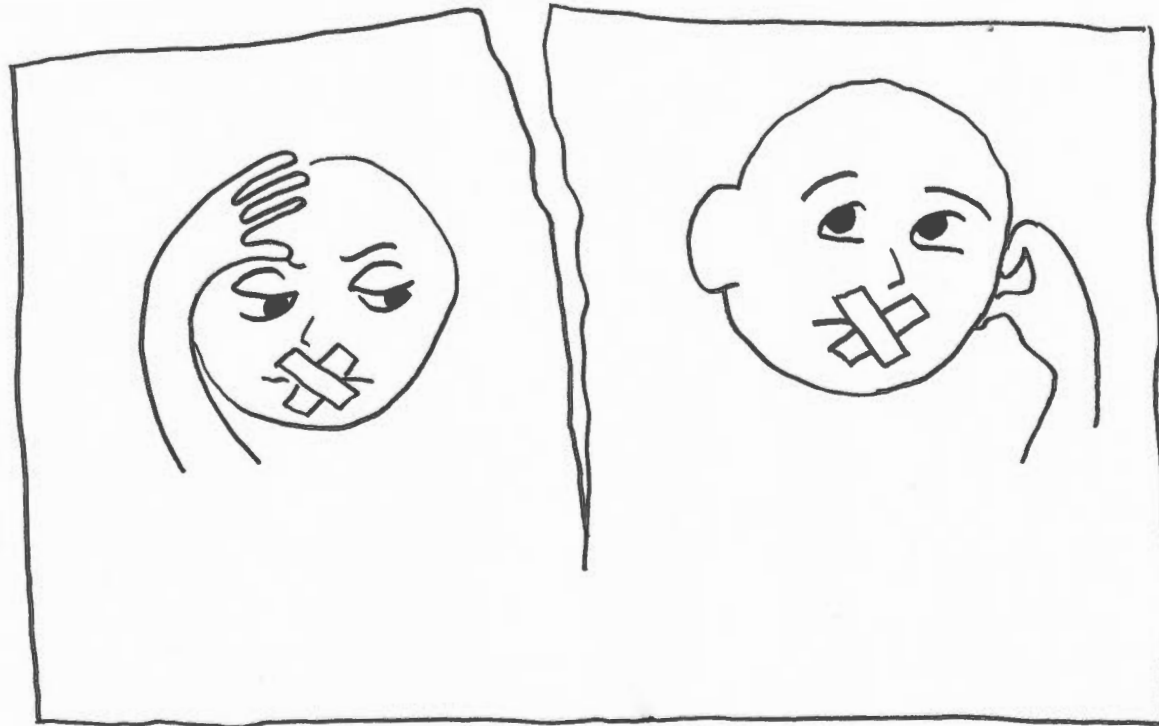
***Example:** Tina, his sales manager, asked David to send some requested information to an important potential customer. After a few days, she asked David to follow up. To his dismay, David found that he had completely forgotten to send the information. He sent it in a panic, praying it wasn't too late. He was too embarrassed to tell Tina what happened — and felt even worse after the customer decided to buy from another company. When Tina discovered what happened, she was deeply disturbed at David's dishonesty. She might have been able to preserve the relationship with the customer if David had told her about his mistake right away, instead of hiding it from her.*

The wrongs we're talking about don't necessarily cause big problems. But the thing is, human beings are extremely sensitive. We all have high inner standards for how we want to be treated, and how well we aspire to treat others. But, even though we know better, we don't always treat others with that high degree of care. When we don't, we're like dance partners stepping on each other's toes. We can all tolerate a certain amount of that — but more often than we like to admit, our carelessness goes over the line.



Example: *John and Marion were volunteering on a project together. One of the ideas Marion contributed to the project turned out to be an important innovation with far-reaching effects. Later, while having lunch with a group of other volunteers, someone asked how their project was going. John spoke up and proudly described their accomplishments, including Marion's idea, using the word "we" — implying that they came up with the innovation together. Marion glanced away, disturbed that he took credit for her idea, but let it go by. John noticed her discomfort, and didn't say anything.*

We may decide such incidents are too small to mention and are better off forgotten, but they're not too small to notice. Each one leaves an impression. If the incidents are not addressed and healed, those impressions accumulate between us, as clouds gathering in a previously clear sky. Gradually, our openness to each other diminishes, and the discomfort becomes palpable.



The true and effective solution whenever we do wrong is to restore loving connection by truly feeling, acknowledging, and healing the hurt we caused. When we do that, we invite others back into the circle of closeness and trust with us, and we again feel welcome there ourselves.



Wrong Responses to Wrongdoing Card

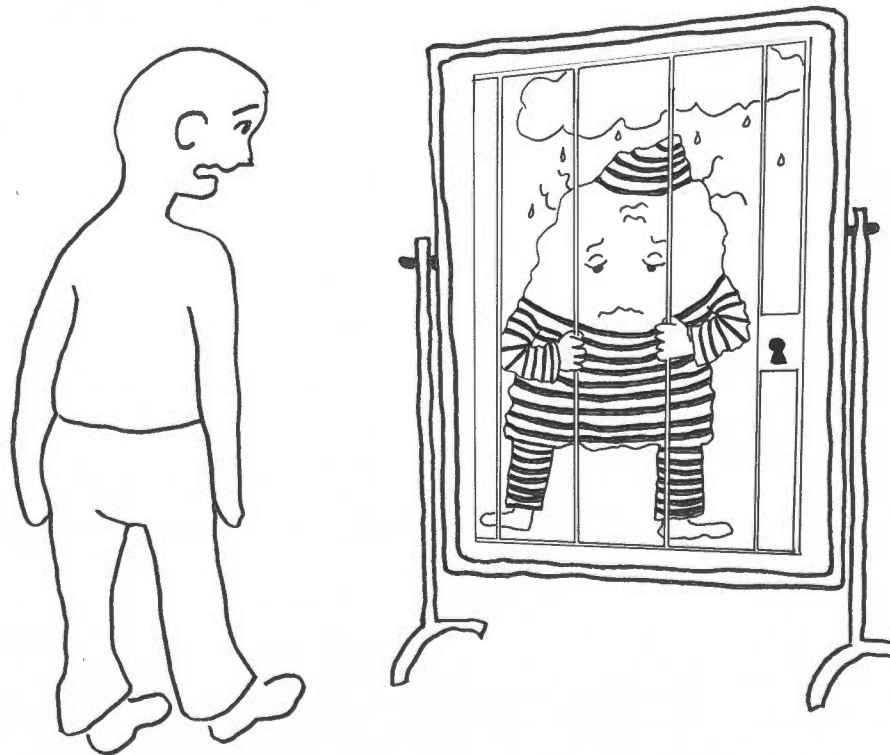
How to Make Friends with Your Conscience

Part 1: You did wrong. You're still GOOD.

*Guilt is not there to condemn us or make us feel terrible.
It's an inner call to make a change, constructively, in a good spirit.*



It is natural to feel ashamed when we do wrong. It is easy to think, “A good person would not have done what I did. I must be a terrible person!” Then we feel like laying low and hiding, telling ourselves that our actions have made us despicable, sure to be hated or rejected by anyone who finds out what we did.



Not true! Even when we knowingly do something wrong, that doesn't make us a bad person, or a social outcast. Our choices and actions don't change who we are. And they don't limit our future choices and actions. The fact that our wrongdoing disturbs us so much shows that who we are *disagrees* with what we did. If we were truly bad, it wouldn't bother us when we wrong another.

We can't simply attribute our discomfort to social norms we've internalized. We've all been exposed to a wide variety of cultural values: For example, we've been taught ideas that support selfishness as well as encouragements to be unselfish. If we want to understand our true nature, we must consider responses that arise from deeper levels than mere social conditioning. No matter what we've been taught about the advantages of a self-serving, survival-oriented life, as spiritual beings we can never feel fully at home in such a life. Wrong action does not sit well with who we truly are, and falls short of the beauty and care we truly want to give to others.

***Example:** Brenda has finished moving all of her stuff to her new place and the last step is cleaning her old apartment. The landlord plans to inspect the empty apartment this Sunday. There's still a lot to do and she's feeling stressed out, so she asked her friend Alicia if she could help on Saturday. Alicia doesn't have any obligations that day but the weather is forecasted to be nice and she was hoping to go on a hike. She tells Brenda, "Sorry, I won't be able to help you." Brenda assures her it's okay. But when Saturday comes, Alicia doesn't actually enjoy her afternoon off. She can't stop thinking about Brenda all alone cleaning her old apartment, and feels bad about not helping her friend in her time of need.*



All human beings have high inner standards for what we want to be and give in life. We want to be love; we want to give beauty. The standards of common culture are much lower and easier to meet than the standards of our hearts. But deep inside we feel a vague regret when we settle for what the world accepts. People in our lives may not complain, but our heart complains. This feeling of regret may not be felt as such, but over time it gathers in our soul and makes itself felt as insecurity, doubt, low self-esteem, and unworthiness.



Living up to our goodness and high inner standards doesn't happen by itself. Although we are good, we have free will and we are free to make any choices, loving or selfish. We are free to allow our higher sensibilities and better judgment to be overruled by our selfish impulses, wrong attitudes, misunderstandings, social conditioning, fears, etc.



Still, bad choices don't mean we're bad people. It just means this:

*Because we're good,
we naturally want to be good to others.
And we naturally want to learn from and
correct it when we're not.*

Considerations

1. We tend to feel unpresentable and unlovable when we've done wrong. And we assume that others would agree — that they will certainly condemn and reject us. But that almost never happens. All people understand the difference between a person and their actions, like a mother does when her toddler crayons on the wall. She doesn't want to disown her son! She just wants to help him learn more appropriate social behavior.

Recall how you have felt when a friend hurt your feelings or caused a problem between you. How did you feel about what they did? How did you feel about your friend afterward? Did you decide that your friend was a terrible person? Did you want to end the relationship?

2. We all want to take good care of those we love. If we would act on our spontaneous caring impulses, our loved ones *would* feel seen, loved, and well-cared for. We could do something that makes their day, lifts their spirits when they're low, enlivens their being. But when we play it safe by suppressing our natural heart responses, our best gifts aren't given. We may be used to living that way, but our hearts can't feel truly good about our participation.

- a. *In your interactions with the people who are most important to you, think about some corners you've cut. Did you skimp on expressing your appreciation? Did you avoid reaching out to them when they were struggling with something? Were you honest with them when they were on the wrong track and heading for trouble? How do you feel about cutting those corners?*

- b. *Now imagine that you had done the caring things you suppressed. How would it have affected the other person?*

- c. *Reflect on the quality of those relationships, and what difference it would make if you cut fewer corners on the care and consideration you give.*

3. Our inner standards come from a deeper place than society's expectations and cultural "shoulds." There are many popular sayings that support being selfish and self-centered. For example, "He who dies with the most toys wins." "You've got to look out for number one." "If someone doesn't like what I'm doing it's their problem."

a. Recall something selfish you did, that had troubling effects on others. What motivated your selfish action? How did you justify it? How did you feel about it later?

b. Reflect on your heart's deepest aspirations and standards. Do your best to describe them. How do you feel when you live up to them? How do you feel when your behavior falls short?

Suggestions

1. The next time you do something you don't feel good about, observe and resist the tendency to go into shame and feelings of unworthiness. Remind yourself that only a good person feels bad about doing wrong, or causing trouble for others. Feel grateful that your conscience is motivating you to reach higher and keep growing.
2. Start noticing the loving impulses that arise in response to friends and loved ones, and actually act on them. Then notice how it affects those relationships.

Part 2: Guilt hurts, but it is a great friend and ally.

*We are all works in progress,
being shaped by a lifelong learning process.
Guilt is an integral part of that —
an inner compass and a healthy motivation.*

No one likes to feel guilty. Our bad choices are painful to remember and admit, so we avoid facing our guilty feelings. But beware! Guilt should not be dismissed or ignored. It is our friend and true ally. It calls us into closer and closer alignment with the goodness that we are and want to share. It prompts us to live in a way that would truly satisfy ourselves and others.

Our guilty feelings are the natural response of our heart, drawing our attention to our wrong turn, asking us to correct it. Like physical pain, which tells us there's a problem to correct or a danger to avoid, guilt tells us something we need to know. It calls us to meet our own inner standards, so that we and all will be pleased. And like a loyal friend, it doesn't stop calling until we do.



Instead of shunning guilt when it comes and doing things to minimize its pain, we should take its message to heart. For that, we need to change our attitude about guilt, and the strategies we've used to reduce our guilt.

Considerations

1. Review your attitudes about guilt.

- a. What are your attitudes toward people who have done wrong or caused others pain? Do you think it's appropriate for them to feel guilty about what they did? For how long?*

- b. What are your attitudes about your own guilty feelings when you have done wrong?*

2. Reflect on the relationship between forgiveness and guilt.

Do you remember a time when being forgiven did not completely relieve your guilty feelings? Why do you think you still felt guilty? What do you think would relieve your guilt?

Suggestion

The next time you feel guilty, resist any tendency to dismiss those feelings. Remember that guilt is our friend. Ask yourself, what are your guilty feelings saying to you? What bothers you about what you did? Be honest with yourself about your feelings, and recognize that all hearts feel alike. If you are uncomfortable with what you did, others are too. Honestly consider what would make them feel better. Probably doing it will make you feel better too. Try it and see.

Part 3: Our efforts to reduce our guilt hurt us and others.

Wrong responses to wrongdoing are common, because people often choose to reduce or avoid their guilty feelings instead of facing their guilt and repairing the damage they caused. If that's our choice, we avoid the person we hurt. We hope time will heal their feelings toward us. Meanwhile, we attend to our own inner pain with consoling self-talk, compensatory good deeds, or self-punishing actions.

The Wrong Responses to Wrongdoing Card discusses the primary strategies for avoiding or reducing guilty feelings. We've all seen them, and done them! But we don't realize that these wrong responses actually hurt us and others even *more*.



- **Hurtful behavior erodes the affinity and understanding we previously shared.** We can't get back on the same page if we don't address it.
- **Wrongdoing shakes people's trust.** We need to actively restore trust for others to feel safe opening up to us again.
- **Until we examine and understand our wrong choice, we are likely to inflict the same pain again.** We really don't want to keep doing that, and our friends don't want us to either.
- **Avoiding responsibility for our effects hardens our heart.** When we deny or ignore our effects and how they feel to others, our willful indifference to our effects makes us thick, uncaring, and clueless.
- **Ignoring our own feelings and sensibilities obscures our inner moral compass, and we lose its clarity and direction.** When our actions bother us, there's usually a good reason. Our discomfort can help us self-correct — *if* we don't deny or ignore our feelings.
- **All this makes us feel even more guilty and uncomfortable, creating a vicious cycle.**

Bottom line:

*Wrong responses to wrongdoing obstruct
loving, open connection with those we hurt,
AND reduce our comfort in relationship altogether.*

*For the good of all, implement
the right response to wrongdoing!*

Considerations

1. Review the various strategies listed on the Wrong Responses to Wrongdoing Card. Reflect on your experience with these strategies — ways you and others around you have used some or all of these strategies to minimize feelings of guilt.
 - a. *Recall a time when someone did something hurtful to you or a person close to you, and then reacted with defensiveness, blame, and excuses. How did that feel? What did you wish they would do instead?*
 - b. *Recall a time when someone did something hurtful to you and then disappeared — they dropped out of sight and stopped talking to you. How did that feel? Did your friend later heal the incident with you, or did it leave lingering awkwardness and distance between you?*

- c. *Recall a time when someone did something hurtful and never addressed it at all, outwardly pretending it didn't happen. If they acted cheerful or helpful toward you afterward, how did that feel? How did it affect the relationship?*
- d. *Recall a time when someone did something hurtful and then handled it WELL. How did that feel? How did it affect the relationship?*

2. Hurts that go unaddressed and unhealed decrease the affinity and openness between people. We start feeling awkward around each other. We feel reluctant to bring up deeper or more vulnerable topics. If this becomes a pattern in a relationship, the two people begin to drift apart.

Think about your past or current relationships. Have you experienced the decrease in openness when hurts are not addressed and healed?

Suggestion

The next time you feel bad about something you did that was hurtful or disturbing to others, observe how you feel and what you tell yourself. Recognize any tendency to avoid facing what you did wrong, by using justifications and excuses, or hiding behind cheerfulness and good deeds, or punishing yourself — or simply trying to ignore it. These common strategies are strong habits, and on the surface may seem easier than facing and fixing the problem you caused. But actually they make things worse! Remember what you read above about the serious downsides of these strategies, and don't do them. Instead, consider what behaviors and beliefs you need to change or improve in order to avoid repeating the problem. And consider what you can do now to restore the affinity and trust you damaged.

Right Response to Wrongdoing Card

Recipe for Healing Relationships (and Keeping Them Healthy)

Guilt is a true response of our heart to our wrongdoing. It is not unhealthy or wrong to feel guilty when we've done wrong, but our perspective on it, our judgment of it, and the way we deal with it need reorientation.

We tend to interpret guilt as a condemnation, and we project on others that their verdict on us is the same. When we apologize from that dark place, it's impossible for the other person to feel completely good about it. Our negative assumptions about ourselves and them can be felt between the lines of what we say.

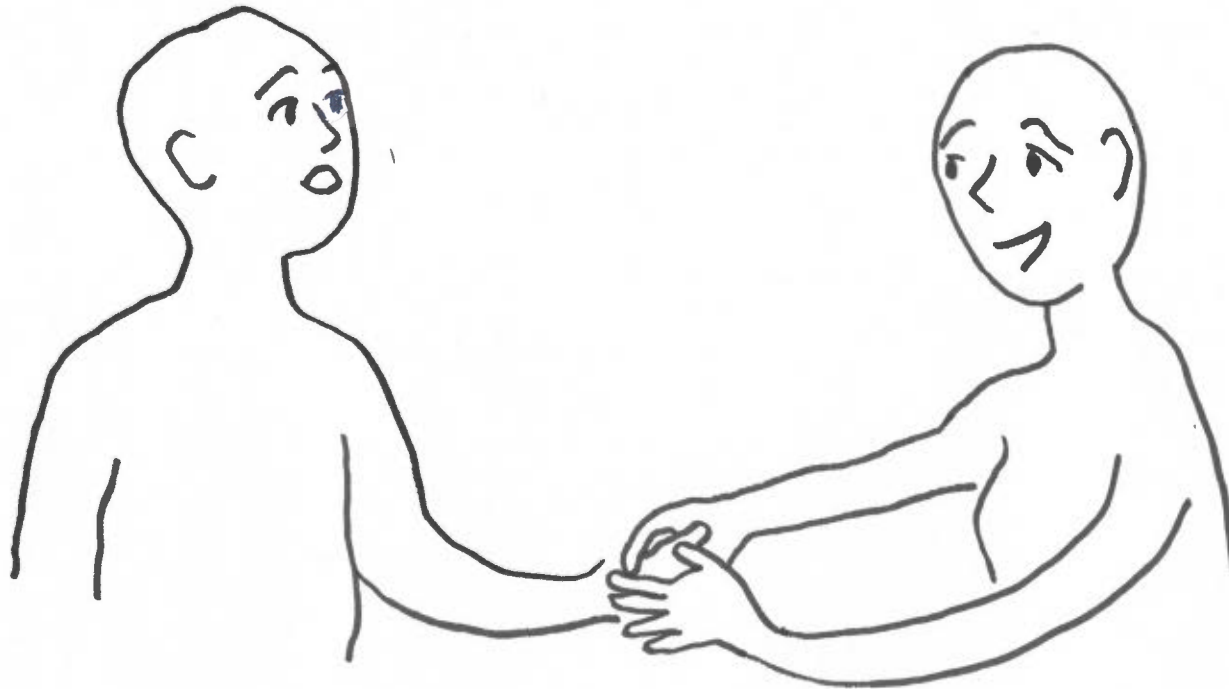
Example: *Samantha's car was in the shop, so her friend Harry agreed to take her to an appointment after work — but then he completely forgot. He didn't show up and didn't answer her call when she phoned wondering where he was. When Samantha later complained to him, Harry realized he was in trouble with her and needed to apologize — but his apology made her wince. "Oh shit, I'm sorry. I'm such a jerk — I always screw everything up. You must hate me!"*



To heal the relationship and our own guilty feelings we need to take a more generous view of ourselves, of others, and of guilt itself. We are not evil or unworthy when we do wrong; others are not so mean-spirited as to reject us for our wrongdoing; and guilt is not a terrible condemnation. Even after doing wrong, we are still who we are: a person who cares and wants to be good to others. And the people who care about us and depend on us still want us, and just want their connection with us restored.

A sincere apology — one without a lot of negative assumptions underneath — brings us both back together. When we acknowledge that what we did was wrong and we don't want to do it again, we're immediately back on the same page with the other person. We're confirming that we feel the same way about the incident as they do. That restores the affinity and heart-connection between us.

Example: When Samantha pointed out his error, Harry could have made things better with a sincere apology: “Oh Sam, I’m really sorry! It must have felt terrible when I didn’t show up. You were depending on me and I let you down. I had a super busy day at work and just plain forgot about your appointment. That’s completely unacceptable! I’ll do what it takes to make sure I’m dependable for you from now on. Sam, if you need another ride while your car’s in the shop, you got it!” Hearing his words, Samantha’s irritation with him dissolved. She smiled and reached for his hand to squeeze it.



This, then, is the recipe for healthy relationships and better living:

STEP 1. FACE what bothers you about what you did. See what was hurtful and wrong about it. Feel your desire to correct it, and not repeat it.

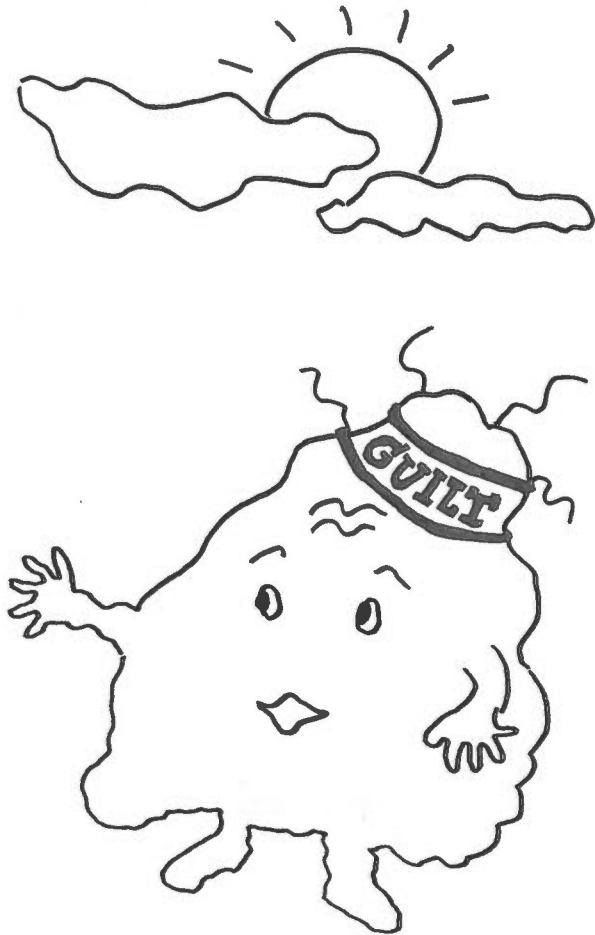
STEP 2. ACCEPT that you and they are both good people. Only your action was wrong. You can't apologize truly and sincerely from a negative belief about yourself or the other.

STEP 3. APOLOGIZE truly and sincerely. Acknowledge what you know — which is the same as they know — about what happened. What a relief to both of you! Now you're both back on the same page: same knowing, same feeling.

STEP 4. DO what you can to correct and repair the damage done. Think deeply about what it would take to avoid repeating the same wrong action. Handle your future interactions in a way that builds confidence in you. Find ways to invest positive energy and caring gestures in the relationship. And, if you caused a practical problem, help correct it.

MY MESSAGE TO YOU,
AS YOUR FRIEND:

1. FACE what bothers you about what you did
2. ACCEPT that you and they are both good people
3. APOLOGIZE truly and sincerely
4. DO what you can to repair the damage done



Suggestions

1. The next time you do something that hurts or disturbs another person, review these four steps and do your best to put them into action. You don't need to be "perfect" at it, just be sincerely invested in making things right again. People will appreciate your efforts!
2. Throughout the day, practice releasing negative assumptions about yourself and others. Feel the goodwill you feel in your heart toward others, and expect them to feel the same toward you. Notice how these practices affect your interactions, and the way your relationships feel.

You Have My Congratulations

Congratulations at last!

You have finally learned to do something
perfectly right.

You have learned to acknowledge your wrongdoings
without blaming.

Thus you have learned how to be
perfectly right about something—

You have learned how to be perfectly right
about being wrong.

So you have my congratulations.

Now understand the value of your accomplishment:

Being perfectly right about something

(even being wrong)

is just the same as

and just as good as

being perfectly right about anything.

Yes, anything.

So now that you are perfectly right about something
how does it feel?
From now on
as long as the sun shines
and no matter what you do
right or wrong
you can be perfectly right about something.
Isn't that wonderful? Congratulations!

WRONG RESPONSES TO WRONGDOING

Guilt is our heart's way of telling us it's unhappy with our choices. The heart is good, and doesn't like to hurt people or do wrong; it wants to love, help, give, create beauty. Guilt is a compass to point us back in the right direction when we go wrong. And thank God for it! But too often, we deal with guilt unconstructively.

For example, we think we're bad because we did wrong. Not so! Our discomfort with wrongdoing proves that we're good—only a *good* heart feels bad about wrong. So, our goodness is not in question, but our *choices* are—and we can fix our choices if we listen to our heart. Guilt is not there to condemn us or make us feel terrible. It's an inner call to make a change, constructively, in a good spirit.

Sometimes, to escape the pain of guilt, we try to stifle the heart and pretend we don't feel what we feel. We make excuses, blame others, claim not to know any better; we build layer upon layer of false ideas about reality to cover up our shame. But what a social and psychological mess that creates! If we would just deal with our guilt constructively and use it to correct our errors, we would free ourselves of so much emotional baggage. We'd be liberated!

Unconstructive reactions to guilt don't make things right. They only make us feel *more* guilty. Here are four common ways we mishandle guilt that only increase it:

1. JUSTIFICATIONS & EXCUSES

- Defend my good image/innocence when my deeds, attitudes, etc. are questioned (even by my own heart).
- Blame others: *"He MADE me lose my temper." "It's a mean world, you HAVE to look out for number one." "God hates me."*
- Make myself bad: *"I'm messed up. I can't do any better."*

2. COMPENSATION ("MAKE-BELIEVE GOOD") Hide guilt behind good deeds, fake smiles, and delusional goodness. *EXAMPLES: martyr; overly cheerful person; indulgent absentee dad; self-righteous bigot; overly humble-serviceful person*

3. SELF PUNISHMENT


- Beat myself up
- Martyr-like self sacrifice
- Many apologies
- Negative self-image
- Self deprivation
- Unhealthy discipline


4. LETTING TIME FIX IT

They say time heals all wounds—but procrastinating only creates more hurt and guilt. So don't delay righting wrongs.

RIGHT RESPONSE TO WRONGDOING
Made mistakes? We all have. This card explains the right, healthy, effective way to respond to the pain you feel when you've done wrong.

DO THIS

 **FEEL.** Feelings of regret and guilt—conscience pangs—naturally result from wrongdoing. That's your heart, your inner compass talking—listen to it. Your moral sensitivity is excellent, reliable, and praiseworthy. It shows you care and you have a good, sensitive heart.

 **UNDERSTAND.** We all make mistakes, but if you understand what you did wrong, you can correct it. Good old simple understanding empowers you to make things right: "THAT was wrong; THIS is what's wrong with it."

DON'T DO THIS

X NO EXCUSES. Sure, sometimes things get in the way of the rightness you intended. But a habit of making excuses is no good. We all want and need to be trustworthy, even to ourselves. That takes self-honesty, responsibility—and NO excuses!

X NO BLAME. Why displace responsibility on others, or on circumstances, to "prove" yourself innocent of sins for which you are, in reality, responsible—and you know it.

X NO SHAME. Beating yourself up is *far* less than useless. It only weakens you and depresses others. Take that energy and invest it in doing *right*.

DO UNTO OTHERS, pt 1

We all hope that a person who does wrong would care enough to regret it.

We hope, too, that they will want to understand truly what they did wrong—so they can do *differently* in the future.

CORRECT AN OFF COURSE? . . . OF COURSE!

Surely, doing *right* is the only way to end the pain that naturally results from doing *wrong*. This is self-understood. When we do wrong and keep doing it, we just feel more and more guilty. No surprise there!

Don't let an "off course" become an "of course"

Without shame or blame, go ahead and *right* your wrongs. If you did something that caused another person suffering or loss, and you regret it—give back to them. Surely your heart would want to do that. It's your faithful guide—listen to it.

DO UNTO OTHERS, pt 2

Who wants to see a person giving excuses? And who wants to see them dive into shame or blame?

We'd all prefer they'd *skip* that junk. Just *feel* the error, *understand* it, and *correct* it.