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If you are ready to tackle emotions that may be getting in the way of a vibrant life beyond trauma, Carolyn B. Allard's brilliant book, *Transform Your Guilt and Shame*, will lead you there. There is so much hope, kindness, and warmth in her words. The writing exercises and case examples of real people make this book a pocket coach for deep and lasting healing. We all deserve to feel just a little bit better!

—**REBECCA E. WILLIAMS, PhD**, PSYCHOLOGIST, WELLNESS EXPERT,
AND AWARD-WINNING SELF-HELP AUTHOR; AUTHOR OF *SIMPLE WAYS TO
UNWIND WITHOUT ALCOHOL: 50 TIPS TO DRINK LESS AND ENJOY MORE*

If you struggle with guilt and shame, this book is a must-read. Dr. Allard has compiled her years of expertise as a trauma specialist into an accessible and transformational guide. The case examples and exercises will have you understanding and letting go of your guilt and shame, all while connecting to and living your most deeply held personal values. I highly recommend this book!

—**JILL STODDARD, PhD**, AUTHOR OF *IMPOSTER NO MORE, BE MIGHTY*,
AND *THE BIG BOOK OF ACT METAPHORS*

Dr. Carolyn B. Allard offers a clear and compassionate path forward from guilt and shame after trauma. Through rich examples and helpful exercises, Allard explores the roots of guilt and shame and explains science-backed steps for healing in a resource that will be invaluable to survivors and clinicians.

—**ANNE P. DePRINCE, PhD**, AUTHOR OF *EVERY 90 SECONDS:
OUR COMMON CAUSE ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*

Given the high prevalence of PTSD in the general population and the large numbers of PTSD patients who seek psychotherapy, this book is a milestone on the road to a more complete treatment for trauma and PTSD.

—**TERENCE M. KEANE, PhD**, ASSOCIATE CHIEF OF STAFF FOR RESEARCH, VA
BOSTON HEALTHCARE SYSTEM; DIRECTOR, BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE DIVISION,
NATIONAL CENTER FOR POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER; PROFESSOR OF
PSYCHIATRY & ASSISTANT DEAN FOR RESEARCH, CHOBANIAN AND AVEDISIAN
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In this compassionate and wise guide, Carolyn B. Allard lays out a road map for healing from guilt and shame. Based on her years of clinical experience and her deep knowledge of research, Allard provides specific and practical healing activities from which readers will find hope and a way forward.

—**JENNIFER JOY FREYD, PhD**, PROFESSOR EMERIT, PSYCHOLOGY,
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON, EUGENE, OR

Carolyn B. Allard translates her years of expertise working with trauma survivors into a user-friendly guide to manage guilt and shame and move through trauma to thrive in life. An excellent companion for those struggling after experiencing trauma.

—**SHEILA A. M. RAUCH, PhD, ABPP**, MARK AND BARBARA KLEIN
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY AND BEHAVIORAL
SCIENCES, EMORY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, ATLANTA, GA

We may understand that guilt and shame bring us much suffering, but unless we have the tools to identify and transform these nonadaptive guilt and shame thoughts, we are stuck in this misery. Dr. Allard has written a comprehensive, accessible book that gives us the road map to develop a realistic view of our past trauma and adversity with clarity and compassion.

—**BHIKSHUNI THUBTEN JIGME**, BUDDHIST NUN, SRAVASTI ABBEY, NEWPORT, WA

In many years of doing trauma work with clients, it has become apparent that resulting guilt and shame from trauma are what people struggle with most and what keeps them stuck in their lives. This book is exactly what is needed to provide applicable ways that people can address and resolve guilt and shame and get their lives back!

—**EBONY BUTLER, PhD**, COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY, THE CENTER FOR
CREATING CHANGE, ATLANTA, GA; CREATOR OF MY THERAPY CARDS®

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: How to Use This Book</i>	3
<i>Chapter 1. The Cycle of Nonadaptive Guilt and Shame</i>	15
<i>Chapter 2. What NAGS You?</i>	35
<i>Chapter 3. Challenge Your Foreseeability and Preventability Thoughts</i>	45
<i>Chapter 4. Challenge Your Insufficient Justification Thoughts</i>	53
<i>Chapter 5. Challenge Your Responsibility Thoughts</i>	65
<i>Chapter 6. Challenge Your Wrongdoing Thoughts</i>	81
<i>Chapter 7. Challenge Your Violated Values Thoughts</i>	97
<i>Chapter 8. Use Guilt and Shame in an Adaptive Way</i>	109
<i>Afterword: Wash, Rinse, Repeat</i>	127

Contents

Appendix A: Worksheets 131

Appendix B: Resources 143

Appendix C: Scientific Evidence 147

Index 163

About the Author 167

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Are you trapped in an unending spiral of guilt or shame about something bad that happened? Do you beat yourself up with thoughts that you are responsible, you are to blame, you could and should have done something different to prevent it from happening or to make things better faster? Do you feel like you did something that went against your values or morals or were not justified in doing what you did? Do you believe that something must be wrong with you, you deserve to have bad things happen, you are not worthy of forgiveness, or you are not entitled to feel better? If so, this book may be for you.

THE EFFECTS OF UNHEALTHY GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt and shame are two of the most painful emotions we can experience. In fact, guilt and shame are so aversive that they compel us to do things, anything, to avoid feeling them. You may do this by distracting yourself with other activities to avoid thinking about the events you feel guilt or shame about, trying to numb the feelings with substances, getting defensive and blaming other people to avoid feeling shame, or sinking into depression and deciding not to show your face anywhere that might remind you of the events or your feelings. Regardless of what strategy you use, even if you have

gotten good at not feeling your emotions some of the time or even most of the time, shame and guilt may still rear their ugly heads and wreak havoc in your life.

Another way you may try to cope with guilt and shame may be more counterintuitive. You may actively remind yourself of your guilt and shame in the hopes that by constantly feeling bad about yourself, you can keep yourself in check. In other words, you may beat yourself up to overcompensate for any past mistakes to avoid feeling more guilt and shame in the future.

Most people who suffer from guilt and shame tend to go back and forth between these two extremes, sometimes avoiding their feelings and other times overfocusing on them. Either way keeps you stuck in a negative, self-perpetuating loop of guilt and shame that just makes these feelings more intense, distressing, and difficult to cope with. This loop is called the nonadaptive guilt and shame cycle, or NAGS cycle.

As if being stuck in this cycle of increasingly distressing emotions is not painful enough, it can cause other problems, such as the following:

- overreacting to situations
- feeling out of control
- needing to know everything or have control over everything to feel safe
- poor self-esteem
- anxiety, which can include worrying, feeling on edge or on guard, feeling jumpy, and being easily startled
- depression, which can include feeling sad or down most of the time, having little energy, and not being able to feel any positive emotions or enjoy things, even things you used to enjoy
- physical problems such as headaches or migraines, muscle aches, rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, fidgetiness, sweating, dry mouth, or stomach and gastrointestinal issues

- intrusive thoughts or feelings about past events
- difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- relationship problems, such as not being able to trust or get close to anyone, not being able to feel love, feeling like others will judge you negatively, having difficulty asking for what you need, having poor boundaries, or being passive or aggressive or passive-aggressive
- irritability, angry outbursts, short temper, and aggressiveness
- reliance on unhealthy coping methods such as substances, gambling, sex or pornography, sweets or other unhealthy comfort foods, high-risk activities like extreme sports, shopping, video gaming, and social media
- difficulty with daily living activities, such as eating, sleeping, exercising, and attending to personal hygiene

In this book, you will learn how to stop the unhealthy guilt and shame loop that contributes to these problems. Furthermore, you will learn how to use guilt and shame constructively. Together, these strategies will help you regain a sense of control over your life. Just imagine being able to feel safe and comfortable around others, going about your day-to-day business without feeling like there's something wrong with you or assuming other people think there's something wrong with you, and being able to make choices that are in line with your values rather than reacting reflexively in ways you later regret. These are the outcomes people report after undergoing the therapy on which the strategies in this book are based.

MY BACKGROUND AND APPROACH TO TREATING NAGS

What makes me an expert on guilt and shame? I am a board-certified licensed clinical psychologist with over 25 years of experience providing direct clinical care, training, and consultation on trauma and

guilt and conducting research on these topics. In my experience with hundreds of therapy clients and research participants, I have personally witnessed the havoc that guilt and shame can wreak on trauma survivors and those around them. Together with other trauma experts, I developed a therapy called trauma informed guilt reduction (TrIGR), which has been shown in scientific studies to reduce unhealthy guilt and shame and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and general distress. My colleagues and I have continued to see firsthand the benefit of addressing guilt and shame in the therapy room using TrIGR.

This book provides you with the same information and strategies you would be taught by a therapist in TrIGR therapy. TrIGR is a form of cognitive behavior therapy, which is the most scientifically supported therapy for many mental health conditions. It involves identifying and changing problematic ways of thinking (cognition) and acting (behavior). Like clients in TrIGR therapy, you will learn ways to catch and change some of the ways you have come to think and act that induce problematic guilt and shame. You will learn that while you are not responsible for being in a NAGS cycle, you can be responsible for getting out of it. You will learn how to transform your life-hijacking guilt and shame into life-enhancing feelings and to live a life in which you take hold of the reins—in which you can make choices according to your values and morals instead of your reflexive survival system.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Before you start, I want to provide you with some ways you can set yourself up for success. These proven strategies for changing behavior or developing new habits are supported by the latest psychological science.

- **Do the exercises.** What you get out of this book mostly depends on what you do with it. The book provides strategies that help you confront problematic thoughts, but you have to use the strategies, not just read about them. Thus, I have provided several written exercises for you to practice the strategies. Please take the time to complete these exercises. Writing your thoughts down helps you examine them more objectively, which helps you challenge them and, if needed, convert them into beneficial ones. You are worth the time and effort. You are provided with worksheets you can directly write on throughout the book. If you prefer to write on separate pieces of paper or use digital worksheets, you can download free versions of the worksheets from <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/transform-your-guilt-shame> (see the Resources tab).
- **Practice, practice, practice.** By “practice,” I mean read this book and do the exercises. Just as repetition is essential for learning new skills, it will be helpful for you to read and follow the guidance for each strategy in the following chapters more than once. If you’re like most people, your mind harbors more than one reason you should feel guilt and shame. That means you will probably have good reason to go through each step more than once to address each version of guilt and shame conclusions you have come to. In addition, some instances of guilt and shame are particularly sticky and will benefit from being addressed more than once using the strategies in this book.
- **Block off reading and practice times in your schedule.** Try scheduling an hour a couple of times a week. If that doesn’t seem feasible, start smaller: 30 minutes on 1 day this week. The more time you can commit to practicing and the more consistently you do it, the quicker you will notice positive changes. But it’s better that you start with some time (and some benefit) than with no time (and no benefit). Also, identify alternate times that you

could read and practice in case something unexpected happens and you can't when you intended to.

- **Pick a time when you are alert.** Some mood or mind-altering substances interfere with our capacity to learn and benefit from any practice we might do. These include alcohol, recreational drugs, or certain doses of prescription medications, such as those that have a sedative, muscle-relaxing, or quick-acting anxiety reduction effect (e.g., anxiolytics, benzodiazepines, tranquilizers, barbiturates, beta-blockers, sedatives, muscle relaxants, sleep medications). So, pick a time when these substances are not in your system.
- **Pick a place where you will be most productive and make it as distraction free as possible.** Minimize your access to anything you find especially entertaining, distracting, or addictive. For example, some of my clients find it helpful to put their phones on silent or airplane mode, and they try not to be in a room where they normally access social media, television, video games, alcohol, drugs, or food. It's also helpful if you cannot see any of the work or house chores you have to do. You may have noticed that sometimes, even things you don't normally consider fun will suddenly seem compelling when you are trying to do something new or challenging.
- **Set reminders or alarms for your practice times.** Don't wait until you feel like reading or practicing the skills (chances are you won't). Just do it when you've scheduled the time to do it. Here are some suggestions my clients have shared with me: Put up some sticky notes in places you tend to see or touch during the times of day you have scheduled to practice your new habits (e.g., on the coffee machine for your first thing in the morning practice time); set a reminder on your alarm clock, smartphone, computer, smart speaker, or other programmable tech gadget; keep your practice reminders and notes in a

prominent place (e.g., on your desk, kitchen counter, or coffee table) and not filed away in a cabinet or drawer or under stacks of other papers or clutter.

- **Block off whatever time you need before your scheduled practice time to make sure you will be ready to start on time with no impediments or interruptions.** For example, you might need to eat, get yourself a glass of water, get access to your book and what you need to take notes, let others know that you are not going to be available during that time, drop the kids off with the neighbors, go to your most productive place, and clear your space and hide things that can distract you. You might set an alarm to remind yourself to do that, too.
- **Set another alarm for the end of your practice time so you can focus on what you're doing instead of checking the time.** You could even set an alarm 10 minutes before the end of your scheduled practice time so you have a heads up and can wrap up what you are working on. If you don't have enough time to start and finish a new section, you could review and reflect on what you just did instead. Remember that repetition is a good thing.
- **Reward yourself.** We are more likely to keep doing something if it is reinforced. So, reward yourself after doing anything you planned on doing during your scheduled practice time. This does not have to be extravagant or take much time or money. You could just go outside or to a window and let the sun warm your face while you smile at what you have accomplished, eat that piece of chocolate you have been keeping for a special occasion, take a luxurious bath, prepare yourself a soothing tea, listen to your favorite music and sing aloud or dance your heart out, call a friend who makes you laugh, brag to someone who will be happy to hear what you have done so far in this process, go for a walk, or just sit in a beautiful

place outside. It does not matter what the reward is or how big or small it is, as long as it is pleasant to you. It's not a bad idea to make a list of pleasant things ahead of time and even schedule rewarding activities after each scheduled practice session to increase the chance that you will reward yourself and, therefore, increase the chance you will continue with the work of developing your new habits to interrupt your problematic guilt and shame loop.

What you are attempting to do by following these tips is to make it as hard as possible not to follow through with doing what you set out to do.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 is a primer on guilt and shame. My aim is to share with you what the latest research says about why we have guilt and shame, how they can serve us well, and how they can go awry and cause problems like the ones you are experiencing. Many people report that having this background information is useful. It helps them better appreciate where their guilt and shame come from, which often helps folks at least stop feeling more guilt and shame for feeling guilt and shame in the first place. You will learn that there are good reasons people come to inaccurate conclusions of guilt to survive adversity, and you will learn the traps our minds can fall into that lead us to faulty perspectives under certain circumstances. This information also makes clear that when guilt and shame no longer serve you well, you can change them from distressing and unhelpful emotions into more beneficial ones.

Equipped with this information, in Chapter 2, you will be led through a series of tips and questions to help you identify the thoughts contributing to your nonadaptive guilt and shame. These

thoughts can be divided into five categories or types of conclusions: foreseeability and preventability, insufficient justification, responsibility, wrongdoing, and violated values. In Chapters 3 through 7, you will learn to challenge each of these types of conclusions. In each case, you will be provided with step-by-step instructions and examples of how you can come to more accurate and, therefore, more helpful perspectives.

Once you learn to challenge the types of thoughts that lead to nonadaptive guilt and shame, you can start using your new, more positive outlook to guide your future actions. Chapter 8 will teach you how to use your past and future feelings of guilt and shame to identify your values—what is important to you. And you will use values as guideposts to start building the kind of life you want to live, in which you hold the reins and can choose to engage in things that are important to you—a life that has meaning.

In the Afterword, I provide advice to ensure you continue to benefit from all the effort you have exerted. The strategies in this book are powerful; the more you use them, the more positive impact they will have.

Finally, if you are interested, there are appendixes with additional resources and references. In Appendix A, you will find an extra copy of each worksheet provided throughout the book. You can also download free versions of the worksheets from <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/transform-your-guilt-shame> (see the Resources tab). Appendix B offers guidance for finding other reliable resources that might be helpful to you. Challenging your guilt and shame using the strategies in this book will help address some of your problems, but there are many other effective tools and resources that could assist you with various mental health and behavioral challenges that are outside the scope of this book. Appendix C lists references to all the scientific evidence supporting the information and strategies presented in the book.

CASE EXAMPLES

Throughout the book, I provide specific and real examples from my professional and personal experiences to help illustrate concepts and different ways to implement the strategies. For each of the client examples I introduce here, I intentionally selected individuals diverse in age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, ability, socioeconomic status, religion, and country of origin. To help maintain confidentiality, some of these details have been omitted or changed, and no real names were used. In some cases, the particulars of different actual clients have been combined into a composite character.

- **Saj**, a woman of Indian descent, was emotionally and physically abused by her wife for over 10 years before she was able to leave at the age of 41.
- **Duri**, a 44-year-old nonbinary Korean American, survived a devastating earthquake while volunteering abroad that killed hundreds and displaced thousands.
- **Maxwell**, a 27-year-old White veteran of the Iraq war, nearly lost his life when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded inches in front of him on a busy street, killing many civilians and fellow service members.
- **Charmaine**, a Black 64-year-old woman, was sexually abused by a close family friend in childhood and sexually assaulted outside a bar as a young adult. There was physical violence involved in the assault she experienced in adulthood but not when she was abused as a child.
- **Felipe** was the 21-year-old son of indigenous Guatemalan immigrants who was teased, called names, and socially ostracized by his peers at school for years after moving in his early teens to a small town that had few people of color.

These individuals are discussed throughout the book to illustrate the techniques for addressing problematic guilt and shame. Whether or not you relate to their specific adverse circumstances, you will likely relate to the types of thinking that trapped them in nonadaptive guilt and shame (or NAGS). You will see them confront and transform their guilt and shame and, hopefully, this will inspire you to apply the same principles to your situation. Now, let's get started!