

# Evaluating Self-Blame

## *Symptoms Addressed*

- Concentration
- DSM-5 PTSD alterations in cognition and mood symptoms
- Stress response
- DSM-5 PTSD arousal and reactivity symptoms

One way to remember that most bad things will not impact your life long-term is to imagine your future self, think about how your life will be different, and consider what your stressors will be at that time.

The next two tools, Evaluating Self-Blame and Finding the Nugget of Truth, are cognitive reappraisal exercises that encourage clients to consider the function of self-blame and guilt, and how these emotions may be related to a person's sense of control. Clients get to reflect on the effectiveness of these emotions, as well as the costs they incur. Finally, in Finding the Nugget of Truth, clients explore ways to decrease self-blame and guilt.

## EVALUATING SELF-BLAME TIPS

- It is not recommended that this exercise be used when a sense of moral injury is present. Moral injury refers to the emotional suffering that results when a client is the perpetrator of, or fails to prevent, traumatic events. This exercise is instead recommended when a client's sense of self-blame or guilt results from events that were largely (or at least partially) out of their control.
- It is recommended that individuals practice this exercise whenever they experience strong feelings of self-blame or guilt related to a past event.
- Clients should be encouraged to step through this technique on a regular basis, as it is somewhat complex and requires practice before becoming effective.
- This technique can be practiced with clients who experience intense guilt and self-blame related to traumatic events. However, with these clients, it is recommended that the exercise be mastered with self-blame and guilt related to non-traumatic events *first*, before attempting this practice with emotions related to traumatic events.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Improved emotion regulation (Gross, 2010)
- Fewer depression symptoms after experiencing stressful events (Troy et al., 2010)
- Less anger and more positive emotions (Mauss et al., 2007)

Example

## Evaluating Self-Blame Worksheet

This exercise asks you to consider why you might experience self-blame and guilt, and how these emotions may be related to your sense of control. Here is an example of how you might complete this technique.

**1. Write down a few sentences about a distressing event or situation that you frequently blame yourself for, or about which you experience guilt.**

*I blame myself for my boyfriend leaving me. We were very close and it took me a long time to trust him. When I finally put myself out there and let him in, he didn't like what he saw and pushed me away because I'm not good enough and I'm not lovable. I should try harder to be a better person and be more successful so that someone will love me.*

**2. An adaptive function of self-blame and guilt is that they can motivate individuals to avoid making the same mistakes in the future. If an individual feels terrible for something they have done, they are unlikely to do it again! These emotions can be adaptive when they motivate individuals to make good decisions moving forward. When you consider your own self-blame, do you believe it is helpful at this time? How might it change your future behavior in healthy ways?**

*I feel like it is true that it is my fault that my boyfriend left me, but I don't have any idea what I can do in the future to be good enough for someone to love me. I don't know what I would need to become for him to take me back, or how to become that person for him., I don't really see how my self-blame is helping me improve myself for future relationships. I think it's more likely that it is making me want to close off and just not trust anyone ever again, which probably isn't so healthy.*

**3. Keep in mind, however, that self-blame and guilt can have other not-so-helpful functions as well. For instance, sometimes individuals experience strong guilt or self-blame as a way to either hold onto, or avoid having, other emotional experiences. One example of this is when an individual experiences self-blame, and in doing so, is able to maintain a sense of control and avoid feelings of helplessness. Are guilt and self-blame working for you, or against you? Are some of the functions of your self-blame/guilt unhelpful to you?**

In this example the individual strongly blames herself for what happened and believes that if she had made different decisions, she would not have been assaulted. Notice that in this line of thinking, causation is not attributed to the rapist, which seems peculiar until you can understand the function of this individual's self-blame.

From the survivor's perspective, she was in control of everything that happened that night, including another person's behavior. By blaming herself for what happened, she is able to maintain a strong sense of control. By believing that she was totally in control of what happened, she can avoid feeling helpless, out of control, and unsafe walking through the world. If, conversely, she attributed her rape to the individual who assaulted her, she may feel helpless, out control, and fearful that this type of event may occur again in the future. If she did not cause the event, then it makes her vulnerable to experiencing additional traumatic events in the future, which can be terrifying to imagine.

In other words, it is possible that this individual experiences self-blame as a way to feel in control and avoid feeling helpless. This is an example of a possible function of her self-blame and guilt.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this type of emotion regulation and mental gymnastics. In fact, it is intelligent and quite sophisticated. However, as stated before, interpretations of events that lead to the experience of self-blame and guilt can actually halt recovery and healing after stressful or traumatic events. While feeling out of control and helpless is also not preferable, keep in mind that ongoing self-blame, shame, and guilt often prevent healing.

A common scenario that illustrates this is with survivors of sexual violence who blame themselves for their assault. Here's how the thinking may go:

*"If I hadn't been drinking that night, I wouldn't have been raped. It's my fault for going to the party alone, going to that guy's room, and for drinking all night beforehand. I deserved for that to happen to me because I was so stupid in my decision-making. If I hadn't been so irresponsible, I would have stayed safe and my life wouldn't be ruined."*

**4. What impact do you believe your own self-blame might be having on your healing and recovery? At this time, is your self-blame helpful, as described in Step 2, or has it become unhelpful?**

*Again, I still feel like it is my fault that my boyfriend left, but the self-blame isn't really helping me right now, it is just making me feel worse and worse about myself.*

## Evaluating Self-Blame

This exercise asks you to consider why you might experience self-blame and guilt, and how these emotions may be related to your sense of control.

**1. Write down a few sentences about a distressing event or situation that you frequently blame yourself for, or about which you experience guilt.**

**2. An adaptive function of self-blame and guilt is that they can motivate individuals to avoid making the same mistakes in the future. If an individual feels terrible for something they have done, they are unlikely to do it again! These emotions can be adaptive when they motivate individuals to make good decisions moving forward. When you consider your own self-blame, do you believe it is helpful at this time? How might it change your future behavior in healthy ways?**

**3. Keep in mind, however, that self-blame and guilt can have other not-so-helpful functions as well. For instance, sometimes individuals experience strong guilt or self-blame as a way to either hold onto, or avoid having, other emotional experiences. One example of this is when an individual experiences self-blame, and in doing so, tries to maintain a sense of control and avoid feelings of helplessness. However, this can lead to the individual becoming “stuck” in distressing, self-defeating thoughts and emotions, and can hinder natural healing. Are guilt and self-blame working for you, or against you? Are some of the functions of your self-blame/guilt unhelpful to you?**

**4. What impact do you believe your own self-blame might be having on your healing and recovery? At this time, is your self-blame helpful, as described in Step 2, or has it become unhelpful?**