

Thank you for your interest in this topic. If you have any questions about this, or any issue, please contact our office at 214-642-8737

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Stonebriar Counseling Associates
3550 Parkwood Blvd., Suite 301, Building C
Frisco, TX. 75034
214-642-8737

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Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

False Guilt: The Origin

The way we recognize our guilt is through a conscience. We might define our conscience as that immaterial part of our creation that sits in moral judgment of all our actions and thoughts. Every one of us has a conscience that tells us whether what we are doing or thinking is right or wrong. Some may say that there are some people who do not possess a conscience, but I contend that each person has a conscience. In Romans 2:15, it states that the Gentiles often times did the things contained in the Law of Moses that were required of Israel. Since the Law of Moses was not given to the Gentiles, there had to be some other motivating factor that caused them to do what was right. Paul states that their conscience bore them witness. I believe we can safely conclude that part of our inherent creation is the possession of a conscience. Additionally, our consciences are shaped by knowledge. In 1 Corinthians 8:10-11, Paul deals with the conscience of a person who sees another Christian in a pagan temple for the purpose of purchasing meat. The first does not believe the second should be there because he has been told or concluded that it is out of the will of God for Christians to enter pagan worship places. Whatever knowledge or information causing this

person to reach this conclusion became the operating knowledge base of their conscience. This is where false guilt originates. In his book, *False Guilt* (1993 NavPress), Steve Shores describes false guilt as an overactive conscience that operates internally to attract the expectations of other people. In other words, some-one with false guilt has a conscience that magnetizes to the expectations of others in order to meet the approval of people in the form of a pseudo-identity. Consequently, the individual will actively magnetize him/herself to a spouse, friends, peers, work associates, etc., as a means by which to be a people pleaser. This magnetized overactive conscience to be a people pleaser is fueled by the notion that one is of value by being a "good" person if they are viewed favorably in the eyes of those whom he/she is working hard to please. This intense effort to please people may be self-created because they have internalized impossible standards, criticisms, rules, or judgments of other people. The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) notes excessive guilt as a symptom in several categories correlated with certain types of pathology. In fact Malatesta and Wilson (1988) noted that

long-term exposure to internal messages inducing a particular emotion can lead to internal messages inducing a particular emotion resulting in *Surfeit pathology*, meaning too much of the emotion in question can produce a maladaptive schema through which experience is interpreted.² Therefore, false guilt can create a cauldron of self-condemnation, regret, shame, low-self-esteem often mixed with anxiety, a desire to withdraw or avoid confrontation and the fear of punishment. A conscience that goes on overdrive seeks acceptance of oneself, others, or God (i.e. "God is so angry with me that He may permanently reject me, therefore I must do all I can to please Him and get back in His good graces.") Every time false guilt is felt, it is projected into the conviction that the individual or even God must be angry and rejecting.

False Guilt: The Consequences

For someone who experiences false guilt the results can bring about a devastating sense of fear or perhaps panic because they never know for sure if they measure up. According to Steve Shores there are a number of major consequences of false guilt. The first consequence he calls "striving

² Malatesta, C.Z., & Wilson, A. (1988). Emotion cognition interaction in personality development: A discrete emotions, functionalist analysis. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 91-112.

without arriving" where there is no hope in the system set up by the overactive conscience. The ability to enjoy the meaning and purpose of what one has accomplished is never acceptable within the conscience of those experiencing false guilt. They convince themselves to try harder, but they never experience genuine satisfaction. Life becomes a perpetual treadmill where disappointment seems to be the only reward. The second consequence is "constant vigilance." The overactive conscience produces an internal checklist- constantly evaluating and even doubting if one's performance is acceptable to the people they are trying to please. A counselee with false guilt may report how they feel ineffective and incompetent in their productivity and brood or ruminate excessively with negative emotions even to the point of externalizing blame for their sense of inadequacy. A third consequence is "taking the pack mule approach to life." An overactive conscience attempts to pass a demanding test to reveal one's worth. The test consists of trying to accumulate enough evidences of goodness so as to escape the accusation of worthlessness. For example, the guilt-ridden person gives themselves a daily dose of taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles so while the burdens pile higher and higher, they think that something must be wrong if they don't place themselves under a rigorous schedule or burden of responsibility than is healthy or necessary. I have

even met some Christian men and women with an overactive conscience who go through the motions, teach a Sunday school class, help out with the missions committee, serve on the board, and attend every church social as if to prove one's worthiness "because that is what good Christians are supposed to do." Steve Shores says that the central question for each believer is, "Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?" Instead we should be asking, "Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the sacrifice of Christ?"

☐ False Guilt: The Cure

The first thing to realize is that there is such a thing as false guilt. If one is to break free from the chain of false guilt, then they must embrace Christ's atonement rather than their own sense of perfectionism. When someone feels guilty even when a sinful action or attitude is not present they believe they have to live up to a personal, idealized image. That image has distorted the viewpoint of their internal self-perception. A personal sense of security changes if values become conditioned amid negative values. It is common to see the manifestation of two distinct attitudinal changes in personality: blaming and emotional mutism. Those with false guilt have a tendency to place emotional heat-seeking missiles of blame onto other

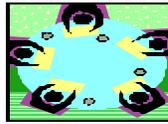
people or they focus inwardly thereby destroying themselves from accusations of unworthiness. This is often an attempt to insulate oneself from the pain of rejection, resentment, and anger. The individual destroys him/herself by becoming alienated emotionally from others. The solution is three-fold: 1) Console the individual to embrace Christ's atonement and accept what He did on the cross once and for all (Romans 6:10); 2) The process of reconciliation. Encourage the individual to have compassion for themselves. On the basis of Christ's acceptance of us in taking all our rejection, punishment, and shame, it is only reasonable that we should not allow these burdens to erode our feelings of self-esteem. The proper response is that God in His grace through Christ is the Great Burden Bearer (Mtt. 11:28-30); 3) the process of restoration. Engage the individual in seeking out the meaning and purpose of their daily life. Instead of blaming or criticizing themselves or others, encourage the individual to plant seeds of gratefulness for how good and faithful God has been to them each day. They may find it helpful to keep a log or journal and entry their feelings while writing a prayer to God each day/week. Despite the discouraging history of what false guilt produces, if they really want to change, God has the power to free them from those chains of bondage.



Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

From the desk of....

Bob Good



Sexual Addiction Group Meeting
Tuesday Nights at 7:00 pm
Location: SCA office



Dear Educator and Ministry Leader:

You're guilty! "You did it again!" "You're a failure!"

These statements are not the verbal language of a judge or an angry parent but the inner condemnations and self-criticisms buried deep in the minds of many people. They are mental scripts that produce crippling feelings of guilt that demand and take command of one's personality leading to depression, anxiety disorders and marital conflict. Guilt has been a human emotion ever since Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8-10). We experience it as a mental preoccupation with a sinking feeling in the stomach or a cloud blocking our ability to enjoy the meaning and purpose of life.

Author and professor Matthias Neuman writes: "If you feel bothered by a sense of never being good enough, or if you feel that you have done something so contemptible that you are not worthy of anyone's love, then guilt may be controlling your life."¹

The word "guilt" is a legal term meaning "to commit a breach of conduct." In general, there are two types of guilt-*genuine guilt*, which is the result of violating one's moral beliefs in contrast to *false guilt*, which is derived from misconceptions or feelings gone astray. Regarding *false guilt*, the individual actually feels and believes that he/she is guilty though they have not committed any moral violation.

In my years of counseling, I have asked people to identify the source of their emotional struggle. Inevitably, they comment, "I just have this overwhelming feeling inside of me." Unable to define the source they know that whatever it is there is a pressing sense of self-condemnation slowly destroying them on the inside. This month's article will discuss the **source**, **consequence**, and the **cure**. It is my hope that the following information will help those who are hurting from the emotional and spiritual mine field of guilt that causes people to feel trapped inside a world with no escape.

Sincerely,
Bob

Bob is available this summer to
Note: speak at church camps or
Sunday Evening church services.



¹ Matthias Neuman, OSB, *Care Notes, Learning How To Forgive Yourself*



Upcoming Free Workshop

Please RSVP



Spousal Abuse-Signs To look for/When To Refer—July 17, '03

(Free Coffee and Donuts) Time: 6:30 PM

Location: 3550 Parkwood Blvd., Suite 301, Bldg. C, Frisco, Texas

Call SCA office at 214-642-8737 to register

Note:

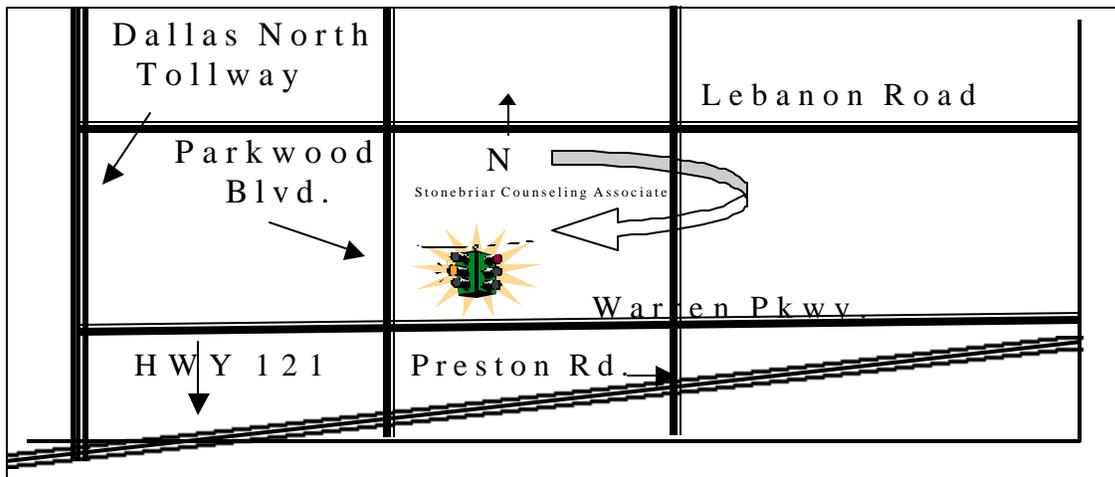
This summer Bob Good is available to speak at camps



New Location!!



or evening church services



Mission Statement

Stonebriar Counseling Associates (SCA) is purposefully passionate in providing quality psychotherapy from a Christian perspective that influences the treatment of psychological, emotional, and mental health issues.

To this end, SCA is committed to glorify God by:

- Believing that each person has the innate ability for personal growth and wholeness.
- Seeking a variety of approaches to help you learn new skills and find more choices so as to manage life's changes with a broader range of solutions for recognizing your strengths.
- Accepting all people with respect and love regardless of age, sex, race, religion, ethnicity or socio-economic status.
- Thoughtfully affirming and carefully following the morals of the Christian faith and the ethics of the professional governing boards.
- Providing research and development for new and innovative programs, seminars, and workshops in order to further the well-being and self-sufficiency of each client.