

Before I Blame Myself and Feel Guilty

Survivors of trauma often feel inappropriate guilt or shame about things they did or did not do. Before you blame yourself for what happened to you read about the thinking errors that victims of trauma commonly make. Tick if any apply to you. If any are familiar then it may be necessary to adjust your thinking.

- Hindsight bias** - Hindsight bias is an illusion where knowing the outcome distorts what we think we knew at the time. Survivors of trauma often falsely believe that they knew the event would happen, or that they overlooked events which ‘signaled’ what would happen. They then falsely conclude that they caused the events to happen.
- Exaggerating my role in events** - Every event has many contributing factors but we have a tendency to magnify our own role. Consider the victim of abuse who blames herself for not disclosing the abuse. Other factors she is failing to consider include: caregivers for failing to protect her, systems around her for failing to notice what was happening, police for failing to catch a criminal, and most importantly the perpetrator for choosing to abuse.
- I could have prevented it _ I caused it** - Just because you could have prevented the outcome does not mean you caused it. Jane thinks to herself “*If only I had caught a taxi instead of walking I would not have been attacked*”. She is making the mistake of ignoring the attacker’s intentions and, ultimately, his responsibility.
- Assuming that because I was accountable I had the power to alter the outcome** - Some trauma survivors make the mistake of thinking that because they were accountable - perhaps because they had a role as parent, or as a person-in-charge - that they had the power to prevent the terrible outcome. Saying “*It was my job, I was supposed to look after them*” ignores what was actually foreseeable and possible.
- We make decisions differently when under pressure or in an emergency** - Survivors of trauma often feel guilty about the way they reacted at the time. They might say “*Why did I freeze?*” or “*Why didn’t I tell?*” Our thinking changes when we are threatened. Options that may seem obvious to us when we are relaxed may not even come to mind when we are under pressure. We are hard-wired to respond automatically at times of trauma in a number of stereotypical ways (typically: freeze, appease, fight or flight).
- What options was I aware of at the time?** - It is common to look back and ‘postmortem’ our behavior. Have you ever replayed a conversation in your mind and thought “*Why didn’t I just say that?*” This is unfair - we can only act based on what we think of at the time. What options were you aware of at the time?
- Am I comparing what I did to some fantasy / ideal standard?** - Is it possible that you are holding yourself to an unreasonable standard? Are you expecting more than was possible? After a trauma some people say “*I should have done something, I don’t know what it was, but I should have*”. A more reasonable standard to live up to is to ask yourself “*What would I expect from a friend if they went through a similar situation?*”
- Am I only focusing on the good things that might have happened had I chosen a different option?** It is common to engage in ‘counterfactual thinking’ - thinking about what might have happened if events had played out differently. Often we imagine having acted differently and then concentrate on a happy outcome. This ignores the possibility - equally likely - that acting differently could have had worse outcomes. Jane felt guilty when she thought “*What if I had just tried to run?*” but this ignores the possibility that her attacker would have hurt her more.

- ❑ **Am I ignoring the benefits of the option I did choose?** Similar to focusing on the good outcomes of a different action, ignoring the benefits of the option you did choose means that you are likely to view the situation in a biased way, and to feel inappropriately guilty. Consider: what were the benefits of the path you chose? Were there options you could have chosen that would have resulted in worse outcomes?
- ❑ **Am I saying that I should have acted on a ‘hunch’ or a ‘gut feeling’?** - We normally act based on the evidence before us. If we all acted on hunches then we would constantly be acting oddly. Just because a low probability event was predicted by a hunch is not evidence that one should act on hunches. If the best you had to go on was a hunch, then you can’t be blamed for the way you acted.
- ❑ **Am I blaming myself for the outcome and ignoring what my intentions were?** - Sometimes survivors of trauma believe that they are guilty of doing something wrong not because of their behavior, but simply because the outcome was terrible (and unforeseeable). An example might be thinking *“I must be to blame because someone died”* and ignoring the fact that the outcome was not your intention.
- ❑ **Am I blaming myself for having had an emotional reaction?** Human beings are emotional animals. Soldiers sometimes blame themselves for feeling fear, even though this is a normal automatic emotional reaction to danger. Some victims of sexual trauma experience sexual arousal during their abuse and then feel that somehow they must have invited it. However, sexual arousal is in large part an involuntary reaction - it does not mean that the action causing it was invited.
- ❑ **Am I ignoring the fact that when all choices are bad, choosing the ‘least bad’ option is a moral choice?** - Many victims of trauma are faced with an array of options, all of which lead to bad outcomes. Victims of abuse are likely to suffer negative consequences whether they fight back or not, or whether they disclose or not. Soldiers are often in a ‘kill or be killed’ situation. In these circumstances choosing the ‘least worst’ option is highly moral.
- ❑ **Am I confusing a feeling with evidence?** - Just because you feel guilty does not make it so, but emotions often give a feeling of truth or untruth to an idea. An analogy might be the fact that feeling as though your lottery ticket is a winner sadly doesn’t make it happen.