

GUILT IN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE

Don't Get Caught: Healthy VS Unhealthy Guilt

© Elaine Moore

Many people with chronic diseases feel that they're responsible for their illness or their inability to heal. Learn how these feelings of guilt can harm or help us.

Basis of Autoimmune Disease

Autoimmune diseases are caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. That is, autoimmune diseases develop in persons with certain predisposing genes when they're exposed to certain environmental triggers. Other factors, such as dietary influences and exposure to allergens, also contribute to autoimmune disease by weakening our immune systems.

Weakened, our immune system's cells launch erratic inappropriate attacks on our body's own tissues and organs. Speculating about their own disease triggers, many people with autoimmune diseases and other illnesses often feel guilty, as if their actions were responsible for their condition. This article describes how these notions develop and explains how these feelings of guilt harm us.

Mind-Body Guilt Syndrome

In an article on the mind body guilt syndrome, David Sobel describes guilt as stemming from a misguided sense of personal control or responsibility for disease. Psychological counseling that encourages patients to imagine healing can set the stage for this misguided failure. "This overzealous belief in 'mind over matter,' Sobel writes, "often leads to inappropriate and unhealthy feelings of guilt."

Sobel explains that most illnesses result from a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, behavioral, and psychosocial factors. Some of these factors, particularly exposure to infectious agents or environmental toxins, may have exerted their influence on our health before we were born or during early infancy. And while many specific environmental agents are linked to certain autoimmune disorders, there is no way to know what specific factors contributed to one's personal illness.

Awareness of Environmental Triggers

Knowing the relationship between environmental triggers and autoimmune diseases empowers us. It teaches us what to avoid, not what to blame. Knowing how diet influences immune system health offers clues for healing. Knowing that sugar and saturated fats stimulate white blood cells and promote inflammation, we understand how avoiding them can help us. Knowing what substances, for instance iodine in thyroid

disease or silica in scleroderma, could trigger or worsen our condition teaches us how we might benefit from avoiding these substances.

Attitude

Well-meaning friends and relatives sometimes suggest that our state of mind is responsible for our illness. And our religious beliefs may conjure unrealistic notions of diseases developing as punishment for past sins. The mind does matter, and our emotional state and nervous system dramatically influence our immune systems. In fact, a heightened response to stress will harm our immune systems. But mind can't always triumph over matter.

We all know people with positive, loving attitudes and mellow dispositions who develop and succumb to serious illnesses. Your inability to move into remission or improve doesn't mean that you're at fault for not being good enough or praying enough. You are, however, responsible for learning the best ways to manage your disease, and a different perspective on your illness might help you heal. But even a change in attitude may not change your natural disease course or pave the path to recovery.

Guilt, however, can precipitate feelings of depression or prevent you from expecting and even demanding the best health care possible or treating yourself kindly. Depression can also interfere with your immune system's ability to strengthen and heal. The mind body connection is a real phenomenon, and feelings of guilt interfere with healing. In her excellent article on Multiple Sclerosis Guilt, Jennifer Gerics offers invaluable suggestions for banishing feelings of guilt.

The Healer's Role

The physician has a responsibility to guide us to good health. This is exemplified in integrationist medicine. The integrationist view of healing addresses the entire body. A good physician encourages us to learn about our autoimmune condition and listens to our concerns and questions, and respects our opinions. A good physician teaches us that there are no magic bullets when it comes to healing. A combination of factors contributed to disease, and a combination of factors is necessary for healing. Included in this combination are proper rest, a nutrient-rich diet, healing plants, appropriate medications and a holistic approach. In this formula, there is no room for guilt.

Healthy Guilt

Marilyn Mecham explains that there are two sides to guilt. Healthy guilt impacts our conscience by providing emotional feedback when contemplating the consequences of bad choices. Healthy guilt, in this context, can increase our sense of responsibility, self-inquire and self-respect. Alternately, unhealthy guilt, the topic of this article, is a burden that can destroy our well-being and discourage us from taking an active part in our own healing. Guilt at how our family is affected by our illness may lead to poor decisions on our part. Living in the past and wallowing in our regrets or anticipating the future with

dread is a form of unhealthy guilt. Healthy guilt leads to empowerment. When we're empowered and participating in our own healing plan, healthy guilt can keep us focused.

Resources:

Astrow, Alan, Apathy in the Context of Illness: A Buddhist/Catholic Dialogue, *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, Sept 17, 2004.

Mecham, Marilyn, Guilt in the Context of Illness: A Protestant Perspective, *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, Feb 5, 2005.

Sobel, David, The Mind Body Guilt Syndrome, *Health World Newsletter*, www.healthy.net/scr/Column.asp?Id=183.

The copyright of the article *Guilt in Autoimmune Disease* is owned by Elaine Moore. Permission to republish *Guilt in Autoimmune Disease* in print or online must be granted by the author in writing.