Guilt

It’s more than “I’m sorry”:
Strategies for managing guilt in close relationships

Guilt is undoubtedly an uncomfortable emotion to experience. This emotional state is particularly unsettling when created within the context of close relationships. Research suggests that people tend to use reparative strategies such as apologies and confessions when feeling guilty in close relationships. However, recent research suggests people also choose additional strategies to manage their guilt such as: escape, revitalization, self-reflection, seeking confirmation, and justification (Alexander, 2002). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the theoretically meaningful variables associated with these various guilt management strategies. The findings revealed significant associations among these strategies and the degree of guilt and closeness felt at the time of the transgression. Specifically, individuals feeling higher levels of guilt were more likely to choose repair and seeking confirmation. People feeling closer to their partners were more likely to choose revitalization and self-reflection while those with lower degrees of closeness were more likely to use justification when dealing with guilt. This research also discovered significant relationships between guilt management strategies and the distancing effect. The distancing effect was positively associated with justification and seeking confirmation. Finally, the results revealed that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem were more likely to use reparative strategies while those reporting lower self-esteem were more likely to use justification when managing their guilt.
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I felt so guilty when I told my mom a lie. I knew that she was only looking out for my best interest. But, no, I had to go and do what I wanted to. And, then when I got caught in my lie I took it out on her. I blamed her when all along she was right. Sometimes, I wish I could just shut my big mouth. I hope I didn’t hurt her feelings too bad.

Guilt can be such an unsettling and uncomfortable emotion to experience. This emotional state is particularly unsettling when created within the context of close relationships. Yet, people frequently feel this emotion when committing transgressions against their relational partners. Whether it involves a hurtful statement, telling a lie, or a misinterpreted joke, people often feel guilty for what they say and do in their close relationships.

Guilt can certainly influence close relationships. In particular, the ways in which people resolve or deal with their guilt can have significant consequences on relationships. As previous research suggests, feelings of guilt and remorse are certainly linked to communicative behaviors (Vangelisti, Daly, & Rudnick, 1991). As stated by Vangelisti and Crumley (1998), “Emotions can affect the course of conversations-facilitating some discussions and inhibiting others (p.174).” Empirical work suggests that people do find ways to manage guilt in their interpersonal relationships. Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1995) found that people often engage in reparative actions when feeling guilty. For instance, many people are likely to use apologies, confessions, and other strategies for making amends when dealing with their feelings of guilt in close relationships (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Yet, others may resort to using less reparative actions. Alexander (2002) discovered that in addition to attempts to repair the relational damage, some people are likely to use strategies such as justifying the misdeed, seeking confirmation from outsiders, reflecting on and learning from the mistake, denying the transgression or avoiding the relationship, and revitalizing the relationship by overcompensating.
Guilt

Guilt for the transgression. Thus, it is evident that the guilt management strategies that people endorse in close relationships are multidimensional.

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the strategies individuals use to manage guilt in close relationships. To begin, the intensity of guilt at the time of the transgression as well as at the time of the investigation were measured to determine their association with guilt management strategies. In addition, this study sought to discover the link between relational closeness and the choice of guilt management strategy. It was also important to discover if people were likely to increase relational distancing when choosing particular strategies. Finally, another goal of this study was to examine the connection between self-esteem and guilt management efforts.

Guilt Defined

Guilt is defined as an unpleasant emotional state that is typically induced by specific moral transgressions (Tangney, 1992). As Vangelisti, Daly, and Rudnick (1991) have claimed, guilt can arouse a particularly strong “me” reaction in a person. This reaction often arises when actions are interpreted as violating one’s internal standards or causing harm or distress to a relationship partner (Tangney, 1992). The individual is typically the source of evaluation while the inappropriate behaviors are the object of that evaluation.

Researchers continuously urge for clear distinctions to be drawn between the emotion of shame and guilt (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Neidenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994). While many situations can stir up either emotion, certain differences exist between the two. Leith and Baumeister (1998) found that those who experience shame tend to feel inadequate, worthless, and possibly even powerless while; in contrast, guilty individuals tend to regret a particular behavior. Shameful people often feel as if others are judging them while guilty people are more likely to feel this emotion because of the ways in which they judge themselves (Vangelisti &
Young). Neidenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski (1994) discovered shame was often associated with statements of undoing self (“If only I weren’t”) while people described guilt as a desire to undo their behavior (“If only I hadn’t”). Moreover, in contrast to shame, guilt is not self-destroying; thus, it can be viewed as more useful in motivating specific and corrective actions (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, what clearly distinguishes guilt from shame is that guilt is more likely to lead to subsequent behavior. People must feel some need to deal with the intensity of the guilt. For some this may mean finding particular strategies to manage the emotional consequences of their behavior.

Guilt in Close Relationships

Recent scholarship has begun to suggest that guilt is a fundamentally and pervasively social emotion. Scholars specifically focus on linking feelings of guilt to interpersonal relationships and those interactions within the relationship (Baumeister et al., 1995; Vangelisti et al., 1991). As stated by Baumeister and colleagues, “…guilt is something that happens between people rather just inside them (1994, p. 243).” Stated differently, guilt is thought to be an interactional phenomenon. Thus, the emotion often arises during and after a conversation as a function of what one partner says or does to the other (Vangelisti et al., 1991). Guilt can, and is often, induced by those close to us. In fact, in Vangelisti, Daly, and Rudnick’s research, participants reported that 80 percent of the relationships in which guilt was invoked were very close ones.

Despite the uncomfortable feeling of guilt, people still neglect, disappoint, hurt, humiliate, and betray those close to them. Tangney’s (1992) research suggests that people often feel guilty for lying, cheating, stealing, infidelity, breaking a diet, and not helping others. She discovered men were more likely than women to mention not helping others when describing guilt-inducing situations. In contrast, women were more likely than men to mention lying when
describing situations evoking guilt. In researching transgressions likely to arouse guilt in children, Williams and Bybee (1994) found boys most frequently reported guilt over externalizing behaviors (i.e., theft, fighting, and property damage) whereas girls reported guilt over violating relationship norms of compassion and trust.

After committing such transgressions people are likely to consider the consequences of their actions in the relationship. Baumeister, Reis and Delespaul’s (1995) research suggests guilt can arise from thoughts and feelings about the transgression and the relationship. People think about the event even when they are not actually in the presence of the other person. Baumeister and colleagues (1995) discovered that guilty people have been found to feel lonely and rejected while ruminating over what they have done. In addition to thinking about the guilt-arousing event, some people may choose particular strategies to manage their guilt.

Research suggests that guilt originates in empathic distress connected with the suffering of others (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Negative feelings arise when people anticipate their actions may cause harm to their relational partner. Such feelings may be beneficial to relationships in that empathic distress may increase individuals’ ability to understand their partners’ perspectives on various relationship issues. Leith and Baumeister (1998) discovered that trait guilt-proneness leads to increased perspective taking, which leads to higher actual feelings of guilt; thus, ultimately helping produce beneficial relationship outcomes. The nature of guilt-proneness seems to involve both the ability and spontaneous tendency to take the other person’s perspective. Thus, guilt-prone people can improve relationship functioning if they respond to conflictual situations by appreciating how the other has been affected by their actions.

Guilt and Cognitive Dissonance Theory

A glimpse into cognitive dissonance theory helps explain why some individuals feel an urge to reduce their guilt associated with transgressions in close relationships. Cognitive
Guilt theory suggests that holding two contradictory beliefs can lead to a feeling of psychological discomfort, known as dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This discomfort arises when people note a sense of inconsistency in their thoughts or behavior. Guilt is undoubtedly an uncomfortable emotion to experience. The feelings associated with guilt can create a sense of tension in one’s mind. This tension can arise in a close relationship when people perceive their behaviors do not match their positive feelings for a relationship. For example, in close relationships people may feel a desire to be loving, caring, thoughtful, supportive, and so forth. They may have a strong need to belong in the relationship and a wish to be perceived as a “good” partner. Yet, despite these feelings, people sometimes insult their loved ones, tell spiteful jokes, lie about their whereabouts, reveal their partners’ secrets, and commit various other transgressions. Meanwhile, they may feel tension between their transgression and their beliefs about what makes a good close relationship. Stated differently, this tension is evident in the guilt one feels when disappointing their friends, coworkers, and family members.

According to Festinger (1957), people have a strong desire to reduce their tension. This tension is particularly evident when considering that guilty feelings can be linked to the basic human need to belong (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Because people have a fundamental desire to make connections with others, they also have a propensity to fear the possible loss of relational bonds (Baumeister et al., 1994; Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In turn, the more mental discomfort, the more people are motivated to change something about themselves, their behavior, or their relationship in order to eliminate some of the tension. Considering how unpleasant guilt can be it is only natural to assume that people find ways to reduce, tolerate, or even ignore the intensity of the emotion. Indeed, empirical work suggests that people do find ways to manage guilt in their interpersonal relationships.
Much of the research on guilt points to the relationship-enhancing and adaptive outcomes of the emotion (Baumeister et al., 1995; Leith & Baumeister, 1998). Guilt is thought to encourage pro-social functions in close relationships while prohibiting the possibility of relationship termination. It functions as an emotional signal that a particular line of action is unacceptable and ought to be interrupted or avoided (Baumeister et al., 1995). Thus, guilt can be used for action control in that the emotion promotes relationship-enhancing actions while also preventing relationship damaging actions (Baumeister et al., 1995). Research indicates that guilt helps strengthen and maintain close relationships because the emotion requires a certain sense of social sensitivity (Leith & Baumeister, 1998). In Baumeister and colleagues’ (1995) research, participants reported feelings of guilt actually promoted honest communication and shared understandings, thus ultimately helping the relationship.

In sum, several scholars have suggested that people often engage in reparative actions when feeling guilty (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Lewis, 1971; Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). For instance, many people are likely to use apologies, confessions, and other strategies for making amends when dealing with their feelings of guilt in close relationships (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Yet, in addition to such reparative actions, other scholars suggest further means for reducing the dissonance associated with guilt (Alexander, 2002).

Managing Guilt in Close Relationships

While some research suggests that guilty people have a tendency to want to repair the damage they have caused by their transgression through confessing, apologizing, or making amends (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Lewis, 1971; Tangney et al., 1996), others may resort to less reparative actions. Alexander (2002) discovered that people endorse a variety of strategies in addition to apologies, confessions, asking for forgiveness, and discussing the issue. This
research discovered six sets of guilt management strategies including repair, revitalizing, escape, justification, self-reflection, and seeking confirmation. With revitalizing, people attempt to “make up” for the misdeed by appeasing their partner or compensating them in some way such as “being extra nice” or “buying new things” to alleviate some of their guilt. In contrast, when using escape people focus on their own concerns, rather than their partners’ needs, and the outcome of the relationship. Rather than addressing their feelings with their partner, some people may try to avoid interaction or escape the nagging feelings of guilt through various diversions such as shopping, eating, or drinking. Others use justification by convincing themselves that the transgression was “not that important” to their relationship in the first place or that what they did to their partners was “not that bad.” In addition to justifying actions, others view their transgression as an opportunity to reflect on their own behavior. Through self-reflection people “try to learn from their mistakes,” or attempt to “get a better understanding of their relationship.” Finally, seeking confirmation involved turning to a third party as a means for dealing with guilt. People using this strategy looked to friends and family for assistance. Some people reported “crying on a friend’s shoulder” or “talking about the misdeed at church.”

Considering this variety of strategies, it is possible that people choose different strategies based on the intensity of their guilt felt at the time of the transgression. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that some guilty individuals feel an overwhelming urge to apologize for their misdeed. Others, feeling the guilt is too intense, may choose to terminate the relationship. Therefore, the first hypothesis proposed:

\[ H1: \text{People feeling higher degrees of initial guilt will use different guilt management strategies than will people feeling lower degrees of initial guilt.} \]

Further, it is possible that people feel lower levels at the time of the investigation than they did when the situation first occurred. For some, the guilt may seem more intense over time, while for others the guilt subsides with time. This difference in the degree of guilt may suggest
the effectiveness of certain guilt management strategies. Thus, the following research question was offered:

*RQ1:* Are individuals’ levels of guilt at the time of the investigation associated with the guilt management strategies they choose?

**Closeness and Guilt Management Strategies**

Previous research suggests that close relationships are the context in which most interactions arousing guilt tends to take place (Leith & Baumeister, 1998). Thus, this sense of closeness may be linked to the ways in which people respond to their feelings of guilt. As suggested by Planalp and Benson (1992), closeness is similar to notions of intimacy in that it is partially defined by the knowledge that people have of one another. Thus, the more psychologically connected and the more knowledgeable people feel about their partner, then the closer they feel to their partner. This can be reflected in how often people talk about personal issues with their partners, how important they feel their relationship is to their partner, and how much they like their partner (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

It is quite possible that individuals perceiving their relationships to be emotionally close could use different strategies to manage their guilt than do those perceiving their relationships to be less close. For instance, it could be that those reporting higher levels of emotional closeness are less likely to employ various escape or denial guilt management strategies. Due to the proximity and frequency of contact characterizing close relationships it may be difficult to avoid addressing one’s guilt. Yet, others feeling “closer” in their relationships may be more likely to use reparative strategies such as apologies and confessions. People reporting higher levels of closeness may also be more likely to use strategies to revitalize their relationship as a way to compensate or make-up for their misdeed. Alternatively, those in relationships perceived to be not as close may find ways to avoid or distance themselves from their partner in order to escape...
their looming sense of guilt. Considering these possibilities for the associations among closeness and guilt management strategies, the following hypothesis was proposed:

\textit{H2}: People feeling higher degrees of closeness towards their partner will use different guilt management strategies than will people feeling lower degrees of closeness towards their partner.

\textit{The Distancing Effect and Guilt Management Strategies}

On a related note, the strategies individuals use to deal with their guilt should be associated with the distancing effect. Relational distancing, known as the distancing effect, involves individuals’ desires to move away from closeness or intimacy when faced with a relationship hardship (de Rivera, 1981). That is, when people engage in distancing behaviors their relationship is bound to feel less close (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987). This use of distancing, in turn, can help individuals protect themselves from the intensity of an emotion. For example, in Vangelisti and Young’s (2000) research on hurtful interactions they discovered that people tended to distance themselves from their relational partner when they believed that the person intentionally tried to hurt them. This tendency to create distance is also likely present in interactions arousing guilt. Specifically, people feeling guilty about their behavior in a close relationship may discover that their transgressions ultimately affect how distant or close they feel to their partner. Thus, the following research question was offered:

\textit{RQ2}: Is the distancing effect associated with the guilt management strategies people use to deal with their guilt in close relationships?

\textit{Self-esteem and Guilt Management Strategies}

In addition to intimacy and distancing, self-esteem is likely to influence one’s choice for guilt management strategies. Self-esteem is an individual difference variable that is characterized by a positive or negative attitude toward oneself. Those with high self-esteem tend to have an attitude of acceptance and liking for themselves (Rosenberg, 1979). In stressful
situations high levels of self-esteem are thought to predispose people to feel confident in their ability to overcome adversity (Fleishman, 1984).

Previous research on the impact of self-esteem indicates that individuals’ perceptions of themselves affect the way they appraise various stimuli. People with a fairly low self-esteem perceive events differently than do those with higher self-esteem. For instance, people with low self-esteem are more likely to attribute negative events to internal, stable causes than are those reporting higher self-esteem (Weiner, 1987). Thus, people who see themselves in a negative light may perceive their behavior in their close relationships differently than those who see themselves in a positive light. In turn, these interpretations may influence their choice of guilt management strategy.

Evidence suggests that self-esteem is linked to communicative behavior. For instance, findings indicate self-esteem is associated with the ways people use active or avoidance strategies in aversive relationship situations. In particular, high levels of self-esteem are positively correlated with active rather than passive approaches for dealing with relational problems (Menaghan, 1982). Fleishman (1984) suggests that people with higher levels of self-esteem are more likely to focus on resolving the problem than are people with lower self-esteem. Thus, it is likely that people with a higher self-esteem perceive certain events and strains as less threatening to their close relationships than do those with a lower self-esteem. This characteristic may then influence people to use particular skills that enable them to avoid or prevent negative events in their relationships. In situations arousing guilt, people may respond in ways that reflect their self-esteem. For instance, people with higher levels of self-esteem, and presumably a stronger self-concept, are more likely to choose strategies that repair the potential damage done to their relationship as compared to those with lower self-esteem. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem may choose strategies that are harmful to the relationship or
harmful to them. In essence, those people feeling guilty with lower levels of self-esteem may choose strategies to punish themselves or their partners. Considering the potential link among self-esteem and guilt management, the following hypothesis was offered:

\( H3 \): People with higher self-esteem will use different guilt management strategies than will people with lower self-esteem.

**Method**

*Participants.* A total of 145 individuals in close relationships participated in this investigation. Participants were recruited from a multi-section communication course at a Southwestern university. The sample included 57 males and 88 females. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 46 years, with a median age of 23 years.

All respondents were given extra credit for their participation. Participants were assured confidentially. Forms indicating their names and instructors’ names were removed immediately after they completed the questionnaire. Participants were given several alternative means of receiving credit in the event that they did not want to participate in the present study.

*Procedures.* To begin the study, participants received a packet of materials including instructions and questionnaires assessing an instance in which they felt guilty in a close relationship as well as the strategies they used for managing their guilt. The instructions informed participants that close relationships could include a relationship with a friend, romantic partner, family member, or any other individual whom they consider as significant in their lives. Next, the instructions provided participants with a description of guilt as it is defined for the present study. Respondents were specifically instructed to focus on the feeling of guilt rather than the feeling of shame. Based on Neidenthal and colleagues (1994) recommendation to distinguish between guilt and shame, the description in the instructions read,

Shame is typically associated with statements of undoing the self (“If only I weren’t…”) while guilt is usually a desire to undo a behavior (“If only I hadn’t…”). Often when you
experience shame you feel inadequate, worthless, or possibly even powerless while guilt tends to make you regret a particular action.

**Measures.** To complete the packet of questionnaires, participants were first asked to recall a time in which they felt guilty in a close relationship. Respondents were then asked to provide a detailed written account of what they did or said that caused them to feel guilty. This portion of the questionnaire opened with the statement: “Please recall an instance in which you said or did something that caused you to feel guilty in a close relationship.” As suggested by Tangney and her colleagues (1996), recalling specific events of individuals’ experiences helps to recapture the richness of real, naturally occurring reactions to guilt. Thus, the next few open-ended prompts were designed to allow respondents to become fully immersed in their feelings as they were allowed to further amplify their guilty experience. Participants were asked: “What happened that led you to feel guilty? Try to recall as many details of the situation as you can. Please describe exactly what was said or done that caused you to feel guilty.” Prompts also invited respondents to explain why this situation caused them to have feelings of guilt and why they thought the situation occurred in the first place.

The next portion of the questionnaire was designed to understand more about the context in which the situation occurred. First, participants were asked to indicate when the situation occurred. Then they were asked the type of relationship they had with the person when the situation initially occurred (i.e., mother/father, coworker, friend, girl/boyfriend, etc.) and the gender of this individual. Participants were also asked how they would define their current relationship in the event that some relationships may have been terminated over time. The next question asked participants how long they knew the person with whom the instance occurred. Then, respondents were asked four questions to indicate how guilty they initially felt about the situation (i.e., “I felt disgusted with myself,” “I felt badly about the situation,” “I felt guilty about
the situation,” and I felt angry with myself”). These questions were modified based on questions used in Tangney and colleagues’ (1996) research on state guilt.

Participants were also asked to complete five, 7-point semantic differential scales to assess relational distancing (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander). These statements asked respondents to rate the extent to which their guilt-inducing transgression caused their relationship to feel more or less distance. Thus, participants were asked to indicate if they felt close or distant, relaxed or tense, intimate or remote, friendly or hostile, and open or closed. The scale measuring the distancing effect had an alpha coefficient of .82.

The next section requested that participants recall the strategies they have used to manage their feelings of guilt associated with this situation. Respondents were given questions based on Alexander’s (2002) measure of guilt management strategies. The instructions read:

Recalling the situation you just described, what actions did you take to manage your guilty feelings association with this situation? Specifically, what did you say or do to deal with your feelings of guilt? Indicate the extent to which the following strategies describe your reaction.

This instrument identifies six dimensions of guilt management strategies: repair, revitalizing, escape, justification, self-reflection, and seeking confirmation. Participants were given 56 Likert-type items bounded by the phrases (1) “Does not describe my reaction at all” to (7) “Describes my reaction completely.” This measure was chosen because it includes reparative items as well as additional strategies used to reduce, tolerate, or eliminate guilt in relationships. The reliability of each of the six dimensions of guilt management strategies was determined: repair .95, revitalizing .91, escape .87, justification .81, self-reflection .80, and seeking confirmation .77.

A measure of relationship closeness also was included in the questionnaire. The closeness questionnaire was used to measure the degree to which individuals felt psychologically close to their partner. This six-item questionnaire has been shown to be reliable in previous
investigations (e.g., Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander). The items in this scale require respondents to report on how close they feel to their partner, how much they like their partner, how often they talk about personal things with their partner, and how important they deem their current relationship. Alpha reliability for the closeness measure was .94.

The packet also included Rosenberg’s (1979) measure of self-esteem. The measure asks participants to indicate the extent to which they “strongly agree” (7) to strongly disagree (1) with 10 Likert-type items. For example, items read, “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure,” and “I certainly feel useless at times.” Chronbach alpha was .90.

Finally, participants were asked to consider their current guilt (at the time of the study) arising from the situation they described. These questions were asked to discover the contrast between initial guilt and current guilt. Participants were asked five Likert-type questions based on the guilt literature. The items read, “Lately I feel good about what happened” (reverse-coded), “At the moment, I deeply regret what happened,” “Lately I don’t feel particularly guilty about the situation,” (reverse-coded), “I can laugh about the situation now,” (reverse-coded), and “I feel okay to talk about the situation now” (reverse-coded). The alpha reliability for the initial guilt measure yielded a value of .87 while the current guilt measure yielded a value of .71.

Preliminary Results

In order to develop an understanding of the instances arousing feelings of guilt in close relationships, participants were asked to indicate their initial level of guilt, the time in which the situation transpired, and with whom it occurred. First, participants’ responses indicated situations occurring within one day from completing the survey to 20 years previous (M=21 months, SD=1164 days). Second, participants were asked to indicate how guilty they initially felt when the situation happened. The mean response was 4.65 (SD=1.65) when participants
indicated initial guilt. In contrast, the mean response for current guilt was 4.01 (SD=1.45).

Respondents most frequently reported guilt-arousing situations that occurred in romantic relationships, followed by friendships, then family relationships. Coworkers and ex-romantic partners were the least reported relationship types. Respondents indicated they had known the person for an average of 9.98 years (range=3 months to 35.75 years).

**Main Results**

A series of multiple analyses of variance and linear regressions were conducted to test the hypotheses proposed in this investigation. Multiple analyses of variance were employed because they allow analysis of several dependent variables simultaneously. This was particularly useful for the present investigation utilizing six guilt management strategies as the dependent variables. As suggested by Stevens (1996), multivariate analyses such as MANOVA are preferred over separate univariate analyses because they typically keep the overall alpha level under control and are better able to detect specific differences among variables.

The first hypothesis proposed that people with higher levels of guilt at the time of their transgressions would use different guilt management strategies than would people with lower levels of initial guilt. To test this model a MANOVA was conducted with the six sets of guilt management strategies serving as the dependent variables. Initial guilt was the independent variable. Participants whose scores were above the median were placed in the high initial guilt group while those with scores below the median were placed into the low initial guilt group. Results suggested that guilt at the time of the transgression indeed influenced the guilt management strategies that individuals used in their relationships ($F[6, 125]=3.87, p<.05, \eta^2 = .16$). Specifically, pairwise comparisons suggested that individuals with higher initial guilt were more likely to use repair and seeking confirmation guilt management strategies than were those with lower initial guilt (see Table One).
RQ1 was proposed to determine if the guilt management strategies people employed were associated with their level of guilt at the time they completed the study rather than their initial level of guilt. A linear regression was performed with the six guilt management strategies serving as the predictors while current level of guilt served as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed that current level of guilt was associated with the guilt management strategies individuals used ($F(6, 127)=4.57, p<.05$). The beta coefficients revealed that current level of guilt was negatively and significantly associated with repair guilt management strategies. Further, current level of guilt was positively and significantly related to escape and self-reflection. See Table Two to view the beta coefficients for current level of guilt.

H2 was offered to test whether the degree of psychological closeness respondents felt towards their partner would influence the strategies they used when dealing with their guilt in close relationships. A MANOVA was conducted to test this hypothesis. The six sets of guilt management strategies were used as the dependent variables while degree of closeness was used as the independent variable (individuals with closeness scores above the median were classified in the high closeness group while those with scores below the median were classified the low closeness group). The analysis suggested that psychological closeness was associated with the guilt management strategies individuals employed when dealing transgressions ($F[6, 126]=4.26, p<.05, \eta^2=.17$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that those individuals indicating higher degrees of closeness to their partners were more likely to use revitalization and self-reflection guilt management strategies. Alternatively, those participants with lower degrees of closeness were more likely to use justification as a means for dealing with their guilt (see Table Three).

RQ2 was offered to determine if the distancing effect was associated with individuals’ preferences for guilt management strategies. To answer this question a linear regression was performed with the six guilt management strategies serving as the independent variables while
distancing effect served as the dependent variable. The results revealed that the distancing effect was linked to the strategies individuals chose for dealing with their guilt ($F(6, 121)=4.69, p<.05$). The beta coefficients revealed that the distancing effect was positively and significantly associated with *justification* and *seeking confirmation* guilt management strategies. See Table Four to view the beta coefficients for the distancing effect.

The third hypothesis predicted that people with higher self-esteem would use different guilt management strategies than would people with lower self-esteem. A MANOVA was conducted to test this hypothesis. The six sets of guilt management strategies were used as the dependent variables. Self-esteem served as the independent variable in the model. Individuals whose scores were above the median were placed in the higher self-esteem group while those with scores below the median were placed in the lower self-esteem group. The findings revealed that self-esteem did affect the strategies that people used when dealing with their guilt in close relationships ($F[6,127]=2.62, p<.05, \eta^2=.11$). Pairwise comparisons indicated that those with higher levels of self-esteem endorsed *repair*. In contrast, those reporting lower self-esteem were more likely to use *justifying* as a means for dealing with guilt (see Table Five).

**General Discussion**

This research began with the premise that guilt is an uncomfortable emotion to experience. In order to reduce this sense of discomfort and tension people are thought to endorse a variety of guilt management strategies. The present study was conducted to explore the theoretically meaningful variables associated with these guilt management strategies. The findings revealed significant associations among these strategies and the degree of guilt and closeness felt at the time of the transgression, the distancing effect, and individuals’ self-esteem levels.
To begin, individuals feeling higher levels of guilt felt at the time of the transgression were more likely to choose repair and seeking confirmation guilt management strategies. Thus, the more intense the guilt, the more likely the individual was to apologize, confess, ask for forgiveness, and discuss the issue with the partner they may have hurt. These individuals were also likely to seek confirmation by turning to others for reassurance or advice. In addition, levels of guilt at the time of the investigation were positively and significantly associated with escape and self-reflection. At first glance, this discovering seems somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, people were avoiding discussion of the transgression while, on the other hand, some were taking responsibility for their actions through their self-reflection. However, it is possible that people feeling higher levels of guilt over time had the ability to engage in self-reflection while engaging in various diversions. This finding on self-reflection was also likely discovered because of the conceptual overlap among guilt and self-reflection. That is, saying the guilt is more intense ultimately suggests some self-reflection because guilt is defined as a self-conscious emotion. However, this strategy also suggests that in addition to thinking about the misdeed and the emotional consequences, many people choose to learn from their mistakes. Thus, in many ways self-reflection may provide a means for preventing future occurrence of a similar transgression.

The results also revealed that people feeling closer to their partners were more likely to choose revitalization and self-reflection strategies while those with lower degrees of closeness were more likely to use justification when dealing with guilt. For some people, using strategies like revitalization may serve to counterbalance their poor behavior. This could be viewed by some as a way to repair the damage with various types of compensation rather than confessing or apologizing for the transgression. Moreover, efforts to revitalize the relationship may also be endorsed as a means of preserving the closeness or intimacy already present in the relationship.
Additionally, self-reflective behaviors suggest that the individual has made a conscious effort to evaluate their own behavior in the relationship. People in relationships with high levels of closeness probably use their transgression as a way to learn from their mistakes in order to prevent future occurrences. In contrast, people with low levels of closeness choose justification as a reflection of their lack of intimacy. These justification strategies involving efforts such as avoiding the issue or convincing oneself that the transgression was insignificant are likely to reinforce their lack of intimacy in the relationship.

This research also discovered significant relationships between guilt management strategies and the distancing effect. The results revealed that people do have a tendency to create distance in their relationships when feeling guilty in their close relationships. Individuals’ transgressions and the ways they handled them in their close relationships did affect how distant or close they felt to their partner. In particular the distancing effect was positively associated with justification and seeking confirmation. Thus, people justifying their wrongdoing or asking others for approval of their behavior were likely to feel some distancing in their relationship.

Finally, the results revealed that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem were more likely to use reparative strategies while those reporting lower levels of self-esteem were more likely to employ justification when managing their guilt. These ideas are somewhat consistent with Festinger’s ideas of cognitive dissonance. His ideas suggest that one of the factors that influence the amount of dissonance experienced is a person’s self-concept (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997). Considering that an individuals’ self-concept is partially derived from their self-esteem, it is evident that self-esteem ultimately affects the ways in which people resolve the uncomfortable tension of guilt. Moreover, people with high self-esteem may be more likely to use reparative actions as a way to restore their positive feelings towards themselves through the management of their guilt. Thus, apologizing and confessing helps reduce their dissonance. In
contrast, people with lower levels of self-esteem rely on self-serving strategies such as justification. This too is consistent with our notions of resolving cognitive dissonance. People use this self-serving bias in an effort to rationalize their actions and decisions so that they do not appear unfavorable to themselves or to others (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study provides important insight on how partners manage their guilt, it has certain limitations. To begin, this research based solely on self-report, is dependent upon one’s memory of the situation. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to recall events exactly as they transpired in the moment. Moreover, it could be that over time, and while explaining the situation for the study, participants actually reinterpreted the situation. In turn, this reinterpretation could actually help people unconsciously cope with their feelings of guilt. Thus, as people change their explanation of the event over time to help them deal with the stress, we come to find a hazier picture of the scenario.

This study was also limited in that it focused primarily on the ways individuals, rather than both partners, managed guilt in close relationships. Although some of the strategies mentioned are indeed relationship-focused, it would be beneficial to understand how partners’ communication influences the others’ ability to deal with guilt. For example, does choosing to accept your partner’s apology help reduce the other’s guilt? Or, on the other hand, does your forgiveness actually cause the person to feel even more guilt?

In addition, the present study was not quite able to capture the effectiveness of individuals’ strategies in terms of how they increased or reduced partners’ guilt. Although an attempt was made to determine current guilt as opposed to initial guilt, the time lapsed between the event and the investigation poses a problem for significant conclusions. That is, although the mean scores reveal that guilt levels are lower in the current assessment as compared to the initial
level of guilt, participants responses are based on their own recollections. It is possible that participants cannot accurately recall how guilty they felt at the time the situation occurred. Further, it cannot be determined if the guilt actually subsided because of their guilt management strategies or because of the time that has elapsed since the incidence. Additionally, the results are further complicated when considering that some people reported on events that happened one day ago while others reflected on events happening several years ago. However, the effectiveness of guilt management strategies in reducing guilt is an important issue to pursue. It could be that some strategies actually intensified the emotion. For example, it is easy to imagine a time in which a confession and apology could actually increase guilt. People may feel significantly guiltier if their partner seems too generous in their forgiveness. Furthermore, it could be that extremely guilty people will continue to ruminate in their guilt while feeling a confession and apology are simply too face-threatening or not enough to repair the emotional damage caused to their partner. Furthermore, some ways of dealing with guilt may be more constructive (“intended to maintain or revise the relationship”) or destructive (“destructive to the future of the relationship”) to the relationship (Rusbult, Johnson, Morrow, 1986, p. 47). For example, blaming one’s partner, instead of confessing and admitting one’s own faults, seems to suggest particularly destructive outcomes in the relationship. In contrast, repair, or talking over the situation with one’s partner, may be a more constructive strategy for the relationship.

While this study indeed provides useful insight on managing guilt in close relationships, certain issues inevitably need more attention. Specifically, continued investigation is needed to determine the outcomes of guilt management strategies. Do feelings of guilt actually help people refrain from repeating transgressions or committing future transgressions in their relationships? Furthermore, it appears that reparative communicative behaviors such as confessing and apologizing are not the only means for managing guilt as indicate in previous research. Thus,
more research is needed to determine how the different strategies function in relationships. Are there some strategies that relieve the transgressors’ guilt while intensifying the hurt for the relational partner? Only through continued investigation of such issues can we begin to shed some light on the effects of guilt in close relationships.
References


Table One: Means and standard deviations for high and low initial guilt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guilt Management Strategies</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Repair</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revitalizing</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifying</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Reflection</td>
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<td>1.23</td>
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<td>*Seeking Confirmation</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.89</td>
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Note: *p < .05 indicates a significant difference between the high and low initial guilt groups

Table Two: Beta coefficients for current guilt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guilt Management Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Revitalizing</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>.25*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justifying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Reflection</td>
<td>.30*</td>
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<tr>
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Note: *p < .05
Table Three: Means and standard deviations for high and low closeness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guilt Management Strategies</th>
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<th>Low</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Revitalizing</td>
<td>4.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Self-Reflection</td>
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<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.89</td>
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Note: *p < .05 indicates a significant difference between the high and low closeness groups

Table Four: Beta coefficients for distancing effect

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<td>Justifying</td>
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Note: *p < .05
Table Five: Means and standard deviations for high and low self-esteem

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<tr>
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<th>High Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Low Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</tr>
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<td>1.25</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking</td>
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<td>1.89</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.77</td>
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*Note: *p<.05 indicates a significant difference between the high and low self-esteem groups