

Assessing the Seriousness of Your Actions

We can feel guilty or ashamed about both large and small actions. How would you compare the seriousness of these three actions on Toby's part?

1. Toby was tired at the end of the day. Her phone rang, and she decided not to answer it, because she didn't feel like talking to anyone. She heard her mother's voice on the answering machine saying, "Toby, are you there? I want to tell you about my vacation." Toby didn't answer the phone.
2. After Toby's mother had left her message, the phone rang again. When Toby heard her best friend's voice on the answering machine, she picked up the phone and chatted for 10 minutes.
3. The next day Toby told her mother that she had not been home when her mother called the night before.

Toby's three experiences describe fairly small events. Yet many people would judge the seriousness of these events differently. For which of these three events would you be likely to feel guilty? Why?

Your evaluation of the seriousness of an action or thought depends on your own rules and values. Many people say that they would feel guiltier about lying to their mother (example 3) than about not answering the phone (example 1). Some people may feel equally guilty in all three examples.

Frequent guilt and shame mean either that you are living your life in a way that violates your principles (e.g., having an affair when you believe in monogamous marriage), or that you are judging too many small actions as serious. To evaluate the seriousness of your actions leading to guilt and shame, you can answer the questions in the Helpful Hints that follow. These questions encourage you to look at the situation from different perspectives. This will be particularly helpful if you tend to feel guilt or shame in many situations, even when others with similar values do not feel that way. Perspective-shifting questions can help you evaluate the seriousness of your actions. Ask yourself, "How important will this seem in five years?" Having an affair will almost certainly still seem like a big violation of a monogamous relationship in five years. Arriving home late for dinner three nights in a row will not seem important in five years, even if it is a distressing event for you or your partner now. Therefore, lasting guilt about an affair would make more sense than lasting guilt about arriving home late for dinner.

HELPFUL HINTS: Questions to Evaluate the Seriousness of My Actions

1. Do other people consider this experience to be as serious as I do? Why?
2. Do some people consider it less serious? Why?
3. How serious would I consider the experience if my best friend did this instead of me?
4. How important will this experience seem in one month? One year? Five years?
5. How serious would I consider the experience if someone did it to me?

6. Did I know ahead of time the meaning or consequences of my actions (or thoughts)?
Based on what I knew at the time, do my current judgments apply?
7. Did any damage occur? If so, can it be corrected? If so, how long will this take?
8. Was there an even worse action I considered and avoided (e.g., I considered lying but instead avoided answering the phone)?

EXERCISE: Rating the Seriousness of My Actions

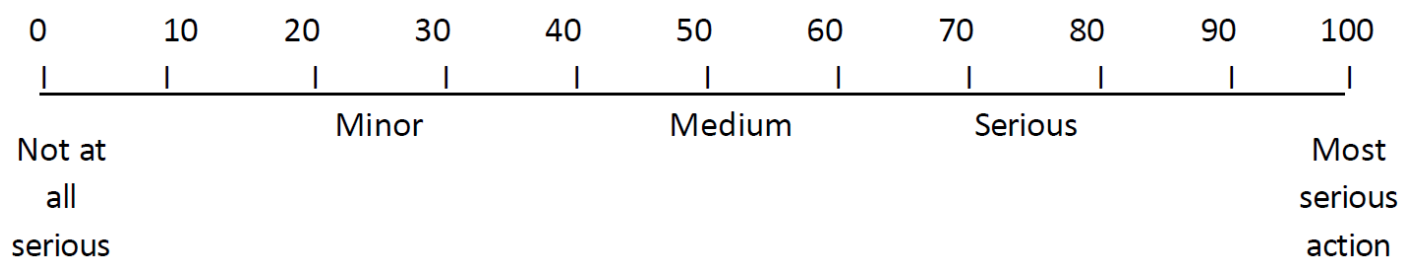
Using the questions in the Helpful Hints as a guide, rate how serious you think your actions are on the Worksheet 15.6 scales that follow. Since people have different values and beliefs about what is right and wrong, you should first make the endpoints personal to you.

At the 100 mark on the scale at the top of the worksheet, write the most serious wrong action you could imagine a person doing. For example, this might be to torture and murder someone. While 0 would not be serious at all, 10 might be something like not returning a small amount of extra change you were overpaid in a store.

Label a few marks on the scale at the top of Worksheet 15.6 so that you see the differences among minor, medium, and serious actions that you might feel guilt or shame about. Then think of the worst thing you have ever done in your life. Assuming that it is less serious than torture and murder, put that action on the scale where you think it belongs.

Once you have created your personal scale, use it to rate the seriousness of actions that prompt you to feel guilt or shame.

WORKSHEET 15.6. Rating the Seriousness of My Actions



My personal examples:

Minor personal example: _____ Rating I give this: _____

Personal worst action: _____ Rating I give this: _____

