

The Effects of Coping Methods on Guilt Over Time

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Previous Research

■ Definition

- The feeling of guilt is a negative emotion caused by antisocial behavior or immoral actions.
 - In other words, it is the negative assessment of one's own behavior.
 - For example: I feel I have done a bad thing; I feel I have done something that nobody should know about; and I feel sorry for someone after having done something or because I failed to do something.
 - Guilty in situations involving personal interaction
 - For example: I injured my friend; I told a lie; I broke my promise; and I separated from my lover
 - Guilty in situations involving breach of rules
 - For example: I stole or shoplifted, and I breached a law or school rule like no smoking

■ Guilt is related to shame and regret.

(e.g., Tangney, 1992; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992)

- Shame is the tendency to feel bad about oneself when being blamed by an imaginary or real person (e.g., Lewis, 1992).
 - In other words, it is the negative assessment of oneself.
- Regret is the feeling experienced when one gets a worse-than-expected result. (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998)
 - It is experienced when one compares the outcome of a chosen option with the outcome that would have been obtained from choosing another option.

■ It is possible to reduce regret by using coping methods.

- Rationalizing (I thought that the experience might be beneficial for me in my later life) and apologizing (I apologized for the trouble I caused) are effective in reducing regret (e.g., Ueichi & Kusumi, 2004).

■ However, it is not clear as to what kinds of coping methods effectively reduce the feeling of guilt.

- Thus, since there is a strong relationship between guilt, shame, and regret, it is possible that methods used to cope with regret will also help in decreasing guilt and shame.

Purpose

- To examine the effects of coping methods—overtime—on the feeling of guilt in two guilt-provoking situations (one type involving personal interaction; the other, the breach of rules).

Method

- Participants
 - 138 Japanese undergraduates (91 males, 45 females, 2 unknown) completed a questionnaire booklet in October 2007.

Items

■ Contents of guilt in the two types of guilt-provoking situations

- The free-answer question form was used.
- We classified many situations involving guilt into two broad situations
 - Situations involving personal interaction
 - For example: I injured my friend; I told a lie; I broke my promise; and I separated from my lover
 - Situations involving the breach of rules
 - For example: I stole or shoplifted, and I breached a law or school rule
- We questioned each participant on the contents of guilt that they felt most strongly about in each situation.

Negative emotions immediately after a situation

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- A five-point scale was used for each item (1: do not feel strongly to 5: feel strongly).
- We asked the participants the following questions to examine the degree of each negative emotion they felt immediately after having done something.

In situations involving personal interaction

- Immediately after you experienced a problem with someone (e.g., broke a promise or injured someone), how strongly did you feel guilt/shame/regret for your behavior?

In situations involving the breach of rules

- Immediately after you broke some rule (e.g., stole or shoplifted, or breached a law or school rule), how strongly did you feel guilt/shame/regret for your behavior?

Methods used to cope with negative emotions following guilt

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- A five-point scale was used for each item (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree)

Positive coping methods

- These are methods based on focusing on one's own behavior and recognizing it.

Rationalization:

- I thought that the experience might be beneficial for me in my later life.

Apologizing:

- I apologized for the trouble I had caused.

Self-searching:

- I introspected with regard to what I did (or did not do).

Improving one's own behavior:

- To avoid repeating the same mistakes, I thought that I must try and improve my behavior.

Negative coping methods

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- These are methods wherein one overlooks one's behavior and tries to fool oneself.

Hiding:

- I hid what I did (or did not do) from others, as I did not want anyone to know about it.

Self-justifying:

- I felt like I could not have acted in any other way and that the situation was unavoidable.

Doing nothing:

- I did nothing special to cope with my guilt.

Escaping:

- I tried not to think about my failure.

Negative emotions at this moment

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- A five-point scale was used for each item (1: do not feel strongly to 5: feel strongly)

In situations involving personal interactions

- At this moment, how strongly do you feel guilt/shame/regret for your behavior? (e.g., broke a promise or injured someone)

In situations involving the breach of rules

- At this moment, how strongly do you feel guilt/shame/regret for your behavior? (e.g., stole or shoplifted or breached a law or school rule)

Results

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Contents of guilt

- The following indicates the contents of guilt in each situation and the number of respondents that selected the content that they claimed aroused the strongest guilt in them.

Situations involving personal interactions

- I injured someone during sports or at play (19 of 112 people).
- I broke a promise I had made to my friend (14)
- I separated from my lover (10)
- I told a lie (7)
- I bullied someone at school (6)

Situations involving the breach of rules

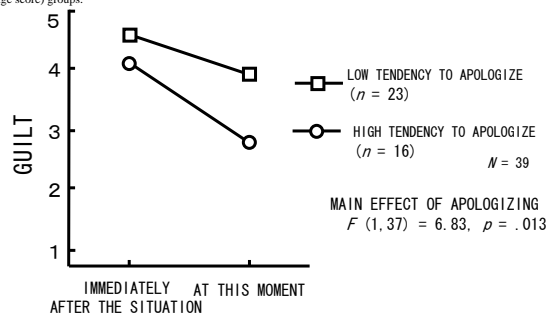
- I stole or shoplifted (30 of 74 people)
 - For example: items at a convenience store
- I breached a law (14)
 - Traffic offense (jumping a red light or speeding), smoking
- I broke a school rule (7)
 - I went to school with my cellphone

Guilt in situations involving the breach of rules

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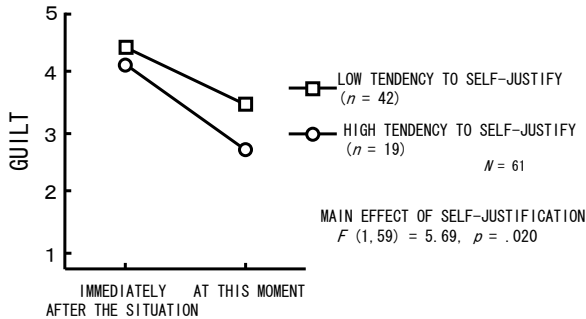
Positive coping method: apologizing

To examine the effects of coping methods on guilt, the participants' guilt score was analyzed using a 2 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA (each coping method x time). Participants were excluded if their guilt scores immediately after and at this moment were 1 and 1, 1 and 2, 2 and 1, and 2 and 2, respectively. On the basis of their use of each coping method, the participants were classified into high tendency (above average score) and low tendency (sub-average score) groups.



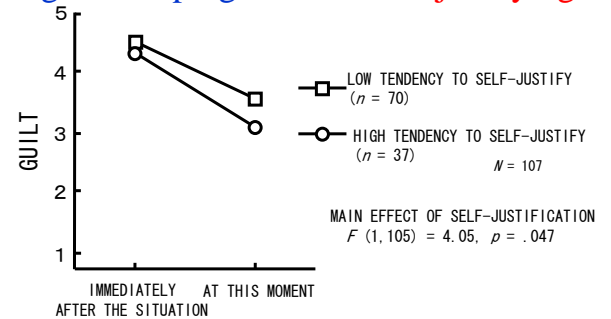
People who apologized felt less guilty than those who did not.

Negative coping method: self-justifying



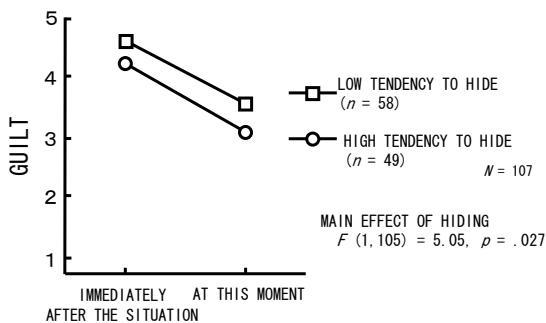
People who justified their actions felt less guilty than those who did not.

Guilt in situations involving personal interaction Negative coping method: self-justifying



People who justified their actions felt less guilty than those who did not.

Negative coping method: hiding



People who hid their actions felt less guilty than those who did not.

- These results suggest that negative coping methods reduce guilt in each situation:
 - People with a high tendency to self-justify felt less guilt.
- However, positive coping methods reduce guilt only in situations involving the breach of rules.
 - People with a high tendency to apologize felt less guilt.

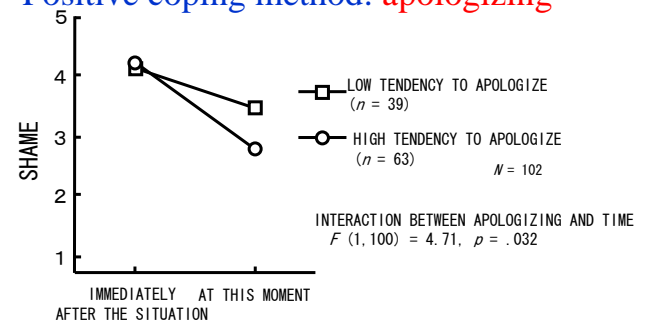
- We believe that positive coping methods are better than negative ones.
 - This is because positive coping methods require introspection and reflecting on oneself to cope with guilt.
 - However, negative coping methods involve fooling oneself and overlooking one's own actions.
- If the shame associated with guilt decreases with positive methods, it would be possible to say that the methods indirectly affect the decrease in guilt mediated by the decrease in shame.



■ Therefore, we examined the effects of coping methods on shame associated with guilty.

- The results of this research revealed that the correlation coefficients between guilt and shame immediately after and during the situation were .38 and .64, respectively.

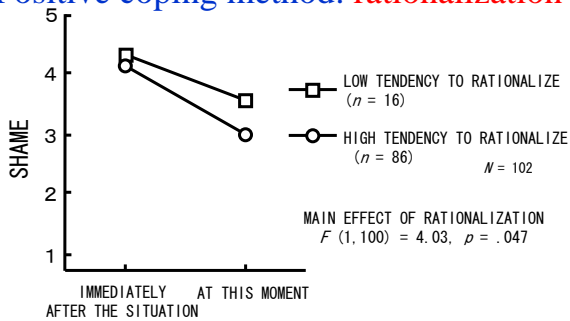
Shame in situations involving personal interaction Positive coping method: apologizing



People with a higher tendency to apologize had less feelings of shame over time.

Positive coping method: rationalization

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People with a higher tendency to rationalize had less feelings of shame over time.

However, positive methods were ineffective in reducing regret.

These results suggest that positive coping methods affect the reduction of guilt through the reduction of shame.

Discussion

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Effects of coping methods on guilt

- Guilt in situations involving the breach of rules**
 - It is possible to decrease guilt by using both positive coping methods (apologizing) and negative coping methods (self-justifying and hiding).
- Guilt in situations involving personal interaction**
 - It is possible to decrease guilt by using negative coping methods (e.g., self-justifying and hiding); however, the use of positive coping methods do not result in the decrease in guilt.
- However, positive coping methods affected the reduction of shame associated with guilt.
 - Apologizing and rationalizing
- The results suggest that it is possible to reduce guilt indirectly through the reduction of shame

Therefore, both positive and coping methods are probably effective in reducing guilt.

Future Studies

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- We asked participants to recall the feelings of guilt and shame they experienced at the time of the action/inaction.
 - It remains possible that these reported feelings were not accurate.
- We need to further examine this topic with laboratory or follow-up researches.

References

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