

Men feel less guilt

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Interpersonal sensitivity in men is low compared with women their own age.
Credit: SINC

Although changing social and cultural contexts mean guilt has less power today than it once did, a new study has shown that in the West this emotion is "significantly higher" among women. The main problem, according to the experts, is not that women feel a lot of guilt (which they do), but rather that many males feel "too little".

"Our initial hypothesis was that feelings of guilt are more intense among females, not only among [adolescents](#) but also among young and adult [women](#), and they also show the highest scores for interpersonal sensitivity", Itziar Etxebarria, lead author of the study and a researcher at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), tells SINC.

The research, published in the *Spanish Journal of Psychology*, was

carried out using a sample from three age groups (156 teenagers, 96 young people and 108 adults) equally divided between males and females. The team of [psychologists](#) asked them what situations most often caused them to feel guilt. They also carried out interpersonal sensitivity tests - the Davis Empathetic Concern Scale, and a questionnaire on Interpersonal Guilt, created purposely for this study.

When it came to comparing the measurements of intensity of habitual guilt of these groups, the researchers saw that this score was significantly higher for women, in all three age groups. "This difference is particularly stark in the 40-50-year-old age group", points out Etxebarria.

The data also suggest that female teenagers and young women have higher scores than males of the same age. "This is caused by certain educational practices, which demand more of females, and which are sometimes still in use despite belief to the contrary", claims the scientist.

The authors also found [gender differences](#) - similar to those noted for habitual guilt - in the two indices of interpersonal sensitivity, although in the 40-50 age bracket the men's levels came closer to women's.

The interpersonal sensitivity of men (especially those aged between 25-33) is "comparatively low". The experts say a lack of sensitivity could lead to absence or excessive weakness of certain kinds of guilt, such as empathetic guilt, which could be beneficial for interpersonal relationships and for the individual.

Types of guilt

The most common forms of guilt are related to situations where we cause harm to others. Stemming from this, it is normal that this arouses feelings of empathy for the people we may have harmed, which tend to turn into feelings of guilt when we recognise that we are responsible for

their suffering.

A previous study, also headed by Itziar Etxebarria, analyses people's experiences of guilt, differentiating two components - one of these being empathetic (sorrow for the person we have harmed in some way) and the other anxious-aggressive (unease and contained aggression).

The anxious-aggressive kind of guilt is more common in people who have been raised in a more blame-imposing environment, and who are governed by stricter rules about behaviour in general and aggression in particular. "It seems obvious that this component will be more intense among women, and especially in older women", says Etxebarria.

The greater presence of this component among women, above all those aged between 40 and 50, explains the marked differences in the intensity of habitual guilt in this age group, "just at the age when males move towards females in the two indices of interpersonal sensitivity analysed", she explains.

"Educational practices and a whole range of socialising agents must be used to reduce the trend towards anxious-aggressive guilt among women and to strengthen interpersonal sensitivity among men", concludes the researcher.

More information: Etxebarria, I., Ortiz, M. J., Conejero, S. y Pascual, A. "Intensity of habitual guilt in men and women: Differences in interpersonal sensitivity and the tendency towards anxious-aggressive guilt". The Spanish Journal of Psychology, 12(2), 540-554, Nov 2009.

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