

The good, the bad, and the guilty:

Anticipating feelings of guilt predicts ethical behavior

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From politics to finance, government to education, ethics-related scandals seem to crop up with considerable regularity. As whistleblowers and investigative journalists bring these scandals to light, one can't help but wonder: Are there specific character traits that predispose people to unethical behavior?

Converging evidence suggests that the answer could be guilt proneness.

In a new article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for [Psychological Science](#), researchers Taya Cohen and Nazli Turan of Carnegie Mellon University and A.T. Panter of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill examine the existing research on guilt proneness, exploring how it might influence our behavior in the workplace and beyond.

According to Cohen, Panter, and Turan, guilt proneness isn't the same thing as feeling guilty after you've done something wrong – [people](#) who are guilt prone actually anticipate having [negative feelings](#) before they ever commit a moral transgression. Importantly, these people don't need their mother, their boss, or their significant other looking over their shoulder to prevent them from committing moral transgressions because their conscience does it for them.

Guilt proneness can be measured with four items, drawn from the Guilt

and Shame Proneness scale (GASP), which ask people to imagine how they would feel in a given scenario. Although answers to the items vary across different groups of participants, the researchers estimate that about 30% to 40% of the adults they have surveyed are considered low in guilt proneness.

Not surprisingly, guilt proneness seems to be correlated with certain aspects of personality. Research suggests that people who are high in guilt proneness are more likely to be sympathetic, take the perspective of others, consider the future consequences of their behavior, and value having moral traits. Furthermore, women are more guilt prone than men, and [older adults](#) are more guilt prone than younger adults.

Across several studies, Cohen, Panter, and Turan have found that people who report higher levels of guilt proneness are less likely to make unethical business decisions, lie for monetary gain, or cheat during negotiations. People who are guilt prone are also less likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, like showing up to work late without permission, stealing office supplies, and being rude to clients, even after taking into account other factors like gender, age, and interpersonal conflict at work.

All of this research suggests that it may be wise to keep guilt proneness in mind, whether we are looking for an ethical friend, an ethical lover, or an ethical employee.

The guilt-proneness scale has the potential to be "an important measurement tool for predicting which individuals are likely to behave unethically in their social interactions inside and outside the workplace," Cohen and her colleagues write. The researchers encourage additional research to examine whether GASP might be a useful and valid tool in high-stakes settings such as personnel selection.

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