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# The Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Effects of Talking About Guilt

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This qualitative study is a venture into the realm of how people of various ages and life circumstances make meaning of confession. Specifically, how do people who confess perceive it to affect their psychological well-being? Because this is an exploratory study in an area with little prior research, a qualitative methodology was employed. The participants in this study were 91 adults with a mean age of 48.8, ranging from 18 to 81 years. Participants completed an online demographic study and then two follow-up emails, consisting of a total of 6 descriptive questions. Results showed a variety of methods for confessing guilt, motivations for confession, and emotional and cognitive changes. The majority reported confession to be psychologically beneficial and an agent of interpersonal and intrapersonal growth. Emotionally, most of the respondents reported feeling a great sense of relief and thankfulness which lasted. Others reported that time to process the guilt, receiving forgiveness from God and the person(s) wronged, changing their behavior and attitudes, and understanding both strengths and weaknesses within themselves aided in overcoming feelings of guilt.

Though clinical psychology is a discipline deeply rooted in scientific methods, science itself is also influenced by various metaphysical assumptions (O'Donohue, 1989). This suggests the possibility that a social science such as psychology can engage in meaningful dialog with religious systems and ideas (Jones, 1994). Thus, when clinical psychologists deal with clients who struggle with religiously related experiences such as sin and guilt, they are not only confronted with selecting the most fitting treatment for the presenting problem but also with the need to understand the religious and cultural issues that may contribute to their clients' experiences. This is now expected of all psychologists (APA, 2002)—that they see religious values as a form of human diversity and strive to understand and respect the values of their clients. Some psychologists take this a step further, striving to help incorporate religious and spiritual values into the treatment process (Pargament, 2007) or to collaborate with religious professionals in order to treat the client in a holistic manner (McMinn, Aikins, & Lish, 2003).

Guilt is a topic of interest for those exploring the interface between psychology and religion in psychotherapy. It has been viewed in various ways—both negative and positive—over time. Some of the early-career writings of Albert Ellis revealed a markedly negative view of the experience of guilt (though he became slightly more open to religious notions later in his career). Ellis (1960) distinguished between wrongdoing and guilt, where guilt involves a component of personal feelings of worthlessness, which leads to human disturbance. Ellis believed that acknowledging one's wrongdoing can be constructive, leading to restitution and behavior change, but guilt actually inhibits this process and leads to self-recrimination and stagnation. Ellis viewed guilt as resulting from a rigid, tenacious view of principles and ideals formed by a person's view of God which are then used to regulate the self. The inflexibility of applying religious principles without recognizing exceptions produces guilt (which Ellis defined somewhat idiosyncratically as inherent feelings of worthlessness) and emotional disturbance (Ellis, 1992).

More recently, Marsha Linehan (1993) in her work with patients diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, has noticed that guilt often leads to self-punishment and desires to

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repair the wrongdoing. She contrasts the effects of guilt vs. shame in therapy. Shame often leads to avoidance of important topics, failing to complete cognitive behavioral homework, premature termination, or failing to show up for therapy appointments. Guilt, though, often is portrayed as excessive apologizing, excessive self-criticism, and even suicidal gestures. When engaging in these actions, the shame and guilt are actually intensified instead of lessened. One method used in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), based on the research by Linehan, is called “opposite action” (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2007). This technique basically focuses on regulating a person’s emotions by engaging in a regulated opposite behavior of making amends. Thus, a DBT therapist would say that confession by itself is detrimental to a client’s attempt to reduce guilt unless the client’s behavior changes to make amends.

A more positive perspective on guilt can be found in the empirical work of June Tangney and her colleagues. A study on the perception of guilt, shame, and embarrassment by those involved in transgressions showed that it was the phenomenological perspective that determined the intensity and distinction of these emotions—not the situation itself. The study found that the distinction of these emotions (guilt, shame, or embarrassment) did not correlate with the desire of the participants to change their behavior or even the degree with which they felt disgusted with themselves. The motivation to change was the same for each of these emotions. Shame differed in that it involved a closer preoccupation with the views of others toward oneself than did guilt or embarrassment (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In another study, Tangney (1991) found that guilt actually motivates a person to “other-centeredness” rather than the self-focus that shame seems to induce. This empathy that arises from sensitivity toward how a person’s transgressions affects others is less prone to defensiveness and the desire to hide—common responses to shame. Thus, guilt can motivate a person to make amends more quickly than can feelings of shame, which tend toward self-protection.

Many clients present with feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment intertwined with their presenting problems. The desire to talk about these emotions in the therapy session can

be urgent in those clients who are seeking relief and a change in their life. This self-revealing of a person’s perceived wrongdoings is one form of confession, and is expressed differently, depending upon whether a person is Roman Catholic, Protestant, or non-religious.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines confession as a sacrament of the Church, which involves conversion (returning to God in attitudes and will), penance (outward signs and acts of conversion), and satisfaction (repairing the harm done by the sins). This admission of sin must be expressed to a priest for serious sins and is encouraged on a regular basis for all sins. Corporate expression of sins is a part of the liturgy at every Mass. And, private and individual confession of sin to God is encouraged daily within the Catholic Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1995). Confession of sin, by many Protestant denominations, is admission of wrongdoing to God through Christ alone (Williamson, 1964).

Religious and non-religious individuals see confession as involving admission of wrongdoing to other people, when appropriate. The sincerity of confession is judged by a sincere desire and plan of action to amend the wrong and not commit the same fault. Confession thus takes many different forms – in a therapist’s office, in friendships, in prayer to God, to a priest or a pastor, toward the person that was wronged, and even to legal authorities. What are the effects of confession on feelings of guilt and psychological wellbeing?

### **Potential Benefits of Confession**

Murray-Swank (2003) found that confessing one’s misdeeds initially increased a sense of guilt among a small group of Midwestern college students ( $N = 45$ ). However, in a 2-week follow-up, these feelings of guilt had decreased, leading to an increase in closeness to God and perceived spiritual growth, which was not reported by the control group who wrote on neutral topics. Another study with college students ( $N = 147$ ) produced similar spiritual benefits (McConnell, 2004). Those who wrote out confessions to God experienced stronger intentions to change than those in secular confession (not directed toward God) or in the control group (those just describing a traumatic experience). The secular confession group and the control group also reported less



spiritual and post-traumatic growth than did the spiritual confession group. Perhaps surprisingly, awareness of personal fault has been found to correlate positively with psychological health among Christian respondents (Watson, Morris, Loy, Hamrick, & Grizzle, 2004). Not only is the psychological health of a person affected by confession, but also the person's physiological health can be impacted (Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987).

Based on these initial studies, it appears that confession of wrongdoing may initially increase a person's feelings of guilt (Murray-Swank, 2003), and then ultimately be associated with enhanced health, spiritual growth, and less guilt than that perceived before the confession. For psychologists, who often work with spiritually aware clients, these findings encourage understanding clients' spiritual beliefs in order to bring about lasting relief from guilt.

Yet, every experienced clinician recognizes that some clients are prone to self-deprecating and damaging views of sin that promote shame more than guilt and do more psychological damage than good. Anecdotally, confession for these clients seems to cause a cascading sense of shame and worthlessness that leads to declining psychological health. Several factors seem to influence how one experiences the effects of guilt and confession. These include views of the God, religious orientation, contingencies of forgiveness, and other psychological experiences.

### **Views of God**

One factor that appears to be intricately involved with whether a person tends toward an outward change-focused guilt or an inward-focused, self-deprecating shame is the person's perception of God's grace, forgiveness, and love. This affects the ability of a person to admit personal sins without losing self-respect. Those that have a view of God as high-loving (high in mercy, grace, and forgiveness) reported increased positive affect after written confession whereas those that held an image of God as low-loving (low in mercy, grace, and forgiveness) reported a decreased positive affect after written confession (Murray-Swank, 2003). This may be related to how forgiving people perceived God to be regarding their sins.

### **Religious Orientation**

Another factor affecting how a person's perception of God interacts with feelings of guilt or

shame is the person's religious orientation (Meek, Albright, & McMinn, 1995). A small sample of Midwestern college students ( $N = 83$ ) were studied regarding how they dealt with guilt and forgiveness by interactions with various scenarios. Those found to be intrinsically motivated in their religion rather than extrinsically motivated, exhibited higher feelings of guilt, higher likelihood to confess their sins, and higher likelihood to accept God's forgiveness for their sins. It is possible, then, that those who are intrinsically motivated in their faith will see God as loving and forgiving, even in the presence of human wrongdoing.

### **Contingencies of Forgiveness**

The person's focus on the contingencies of forgiveness may also play a factor in confession. A barrier found to affect people's perception of forgiveness was whether people see God's forgiveness contingent on what they did or did not do versus forgiveness being unconditional and based on the character of God (Kettunen, 2002). Those who are able to rest in their belief in a forgiving God seem able to look outward toward reconciliation with others rather than being captured in an inward-focused shame that causes them to question whether their misdeeds are larger than God's capacity to forgive. In the aftermath of a misdeed, one person may question whether God is able or willing to be forgiving, thus slipping into a works-oriented view of God (i.e., evaluating one's relationship with God based on doing enough good things to earn God's favor). Another person will hold a grace-oriented view that sees the self's personal character flaws but realizes that forgiveness is based on God's character and not personal holiness or lack thereof. Psychological health appears to be related to the latter view where a person's acceptability to God is not contingent on one's deeds or misdeeds, but upon God's forgiving and gracious character.

### **Other Psychological Experiences**

The mixture of guilt and psychological problems is significant. In a study done in Finland (Kettunen, 2002), at least half of the people seeking confession expressed mental problems related to feelings of anxiety, weak self-esteem, sorrow, or shame. As a result, respondents did not experience a lasting degree of perceived forgiveness or psychological benefit simply by confessing specific wrongdoings. Initially, they experienced relief, especially



when confessing to a pastor or priest, but the psychological benefits were short-term. With the underlying problem arising more from chronic psychological sources than acute awareness of a specific act of moral error, respondents in Kettunen's (2002) study actually felt more guilt as time passed after confession because they were unable to change their behavior, thus leading them to desiring confession again, with increased feelings of guilt.

### Summary

Religious experiences, such as sin and guilt, often are voiced by clients. Those who acknowledge their wrongdoing and engage in socially-appropriate choices without linking their self-image to the wrongdoing, appear to use guilt in a positive manner. Confession is an integral part of this process. The more people see God as loving and forgiving, the more positive is their perceived psychological well-being after writing about their wrongdoings.

Because the process of confession—like the process of psychotherapy—is deeply affected by how an individual constructs meaning out of difficult life circumstances, it does not always lend itself to quantitative measurements using self-report questionnaires. Moreover, the few previously published studies on confession have focused on readily available populations of college students, which may not represent the experiences and views of somewhat older adults at various educational levels.

This present study considers how people of various ages and life circumstances make meaning of confession. Specifically, how do people who confess perceive it to affect their psychological well-being? Because this is an exploratory study in an area with little prior research, a qualitative methodology was employed, using grounded theory to identify themes and content analysis to report trends.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were comprised of a convenience sample from Protestant and Catholic churches and seminaries, and Catholic monasteries. Predominantly, the participants were Catholic (66%) with the next largest denomination being Independent/Evangelical (15%). The remainder of the participants came from a variety of Protestant congregations, such as

Presbyterian Church of American (PCA), Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopalian. Initial contacts were made to pastors, church leaders, and people known by the first author. Once the initial contact was made, these people were encouraged to forward the study information via email to others they know, thus creating a snowball technique for collecting data. To encourage participation, all respondents who completed the entire study were entered into a drawing for two \$50.00 American Express cards.

A total of 91 participants completed all stages of the study, which consisted of the online demographic survey and six standardized follow-up questions through two emails. Because of the snowball methodology used, it is impossible to report a response rate. The mean age of the participants was 48.8, ranging from ages 18 to 81, with a standard deviation of 14.3. The majority of the participants were female (78%). Most participants were Caucasian (87%) with other ethnicities represented as Hispanic, African American, Asian American, American Polish, and West Indian. The geographical areas most represented in the U.S. were the Northwest (34%), Southeast (23%), Northeast (17%), and the West (13%), with a few representatives from the Midwest, East, and South. As intended with the sampling strategies used, the majority (93%) endorsed being Christians. About half (52%) stated they attended a religious service of worship or prayer 1 to 2 times per week. In addition, 30% stated that they attend religious services 3 or more times each week. About half (52%) of the participants have been involved in a church 21 to 50 years, with a small percentage never involved in a church (3%). Most identified their role within the church as lay members (75%). Others were church leaders, priest/pastor, religious order, or seminary students.

### Instrument and Procedure

An electronic interview format was used to gather information on the patterns of confession of sin and the participants' perceived psychological effects of this practice. The initial demographic information was administered through Zoomerang, an online survey website. Once the demographic survey was completed, then initial interview questions were emailed to the participant. These included the following:

Think of a time when you felt bad about something you did or failed



to do. Without describing the incident, please respond to the following questions:

1. On a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the worst evil that you can imagine, how bad was your misdeed?
2. How long ago did the misdeed occur?
3. How did you resolve your feelings of guilt?

These questions were chosen to determine if people tend to report perceived strong wrongdoings or slight wrongdoings. These were also considered Phase 1 questions because they provided an opportunity for the respondent to mention confession, but they did not presume that confession was the best or the only way of handling the situation. For those who did mention confession, the following Phase 2 questions were then sent by email:

1. You mentioned that you confessed your misdeed with someone else. What was your motivation to confess this?
2. Can you describe any emotional process that occurred after you confessed your wrongdoing? If so, please describe this emotional process.
3. Can you describe any changes in how you think about yourself after talking about your wrongdoing? If so, please describe this change.

For those who did not mention confession, they were sent an additional Phase 1 question to see if confession was something they consider when feeling bad about a wrongdoing. This was, "Did you ever discuss what you had done with anyone else or with God?" If this question was answered in a positive manner, then the Phase 2 questions were emailed to the participant. If the question was answered in a negative manner, then no more questions were sent and the participant was thanked for participating in the study. A similar research method has been used successfully in the past to study forgiveness and prayer (McMinn, et al. 2008). These email

questions specifically focus on the internal drives that lead people to talking about wrongdoing, and the perceived psychological and intrapsychic effects of confessing wrongdoing.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results were analyzed using a qualitative method of grounded theory with the assistance of computer software. An inter-rater reliability was obtained on 20% of the sample by having two raters do the coding for a set of randomly selected interviews. Categories formed followed the major themes of the participants' answers, shaped by the email questions. These included How Guilt Was Resolved, Motivation to Confess, Perceived Degree of Wrongness, Change in Thinking, Emotional Process After Confessing, Who Talked To, and How Long Ago (wrongdoing occurred). In the coding process, the second rater added categories to the initial rater's categories due to not understanding some of the Catholic terms used by some of the participants. Once these terms were explained to the second rater and she was reminded to fit her coding to the initial rater's categories, then the inter-rater reliability was respectable for the interview questions (Kappa=.65) and good for the demographics data (Kappa=.98).

### **Question-by-Question Summary**

Each participant was asked to recall a time in which they felt guilty or had sinned and to rate the degree they perceived their wrongdoing on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst evil they can imagine. Participants rated their perception of their own wrongdoing with a mean of 5.9 and a standard deviation of 2.3. No relationship was found between the age of the participant and the perception of wrongdoing, nor was there any statistical difference between Catholics and Protestants in perception of wrongdoing, or between females and males.

Participants were asked to describe how they resolved the guilt brought about by their wrongdoing. Though confession was not specifically mentioned within this question, many respondents mentioned confession. One of the most common responses was to pray and ask God for forgiveness (38%). Next, the Sacrament of Reconciliation was used for confession and forgiveness (23%). Third, asking forgiveness from those wronged was used (20%). Almost every participant attempted to resolve



**Table 1***Change in View of Self After Confession*

Theme	Example	Percent
Know own weaknesses more and wiser	"I was/am displeased with myself. Apparently, I am weaker in this area than I thought. In light of this I have had to take certain precautions to avoid duplicating my error."	45
See self as forgiven and loved	"God loves me and he understands that I am human. I understand that I a human and will sin but that there is hope through God's forgiveness of sins. I felt that if I commit that sin again I would be letting Him down. So, I felt forgiven but that I had to be more aware of my actions/thoughts."	25
Handle situation differently than before	"Confession is truly healing. I can't imagine this happening had I not gone to Confession. God absolutely used that priest in that circumstance to guide me into a better path for my soul. Even if I had talked with a priest outside of Confession, I don't think that I would have followed his advice or anyone else's for that matter. It was only because it was my penance that I felt obligated to do it. His sternness with me did not put me off - even as I became defensive, I sensed that this was really Jesus talking to me - trying to HELP me."	19
Not defined by sin and freedom to be one-self	"I think that while what I did is no less terrible, I, the person who did the action, am not named by it. It does not define me nor the way I think I am led falsely to believe. Telling myself this gives me the freedom to think towards who I will be and the hope that is there, rather than dwell on who I was."	14
See self as not as bad as originally thought	"I realized that I was doing the best I could at the time and that I am human with human frailties. I am more forgiving of myself now."	14

*Note.* Percent is the percentage of respondents with similar views. Categories were derived from the respondents' answers using grounded theory.

their guilt through multiple means rather than employing just one method. The motivations for confession were also multifaceted. For example, one person wrote, "To cleanse my mind and spirit and to be free of the guilt I was carrying. Also, I hoped that the other person would benefit from my apology." In this reply, at least two motivations are embedded—to be free from guilt (as was true for 47% of the respondents), and to help the person who was wronged. Forgiveness from and reconciliation with the person(s) wronged was mentioned quite often (21%).

Participants were also asked to describe the emotional process experienced after confessing their wrongdoing. Most experienced a sense of relief and thankfulness, which lasted over time (40%). For example, "An incredible amount of relief and redemption experienced afterwards, like a huge burden that was an obstacle had finally been lifted." Others expressed a sense of being cleansed and a commitment to change (19%). Still others (12%) expressed an initial

sense of relief and then lingering regret—a knowledge of being forgiven but still feeling guilty. For example,

"I feel that I have been forgiven but I still have some guilt and regret over the situation. I am sure now that I always will have feelings of regret. Although I believe God has forgiven me, I probably will never forgive myself. My guilt and melancholy are not as acute but do remain as a consequence of my action."

The final substantive question asked the participants to describe any changes in how they viewed themselves after the confession. Many participants reported knowing themselves and their own weaknesses more (45%). Others reported seeing themselves as forgiven and loved (25%), experiencing a commitment to handle the situation differently than before (19%), and not being defined by sin with a freedom to



be oneself (12%) and seeing self as not as bad as one thought (12%). Several of these themes are illustrated in Table 1. The participant's responses in this study can be grouped into the following major themes as described below. These themes arise out of the categories used in the qualitative analysis.

### **Time and Its Effect on Guilt**

Though participants' answers vary in many ways, one area in particular shows relatively homogenous answers. This is the length of time that has passed since a sin was committed and when it was recalled and the perceived severity of this wrongdoing. A potential concern in a study such as this is that respondents might choose trivial offenses that are fresh in their memories rather than substantial offenses that may have faded from their memories. For example, it might be easier or safer to recall being discourteous to a store clerk yesterday than betraying a partner 20 years ago. But most of the respondents recalled an incident from at least several years prior to the study, and the level of evil perceived averaged almost 6 on a 10-point scale. Thus, it appears that respondents chose substantial offenses from the past that have lingered in their memories. The reason for this is unclear, but possibly people chose to talk about a long-past sin because it is now safe to recall and think about again. Or, perhaps it made such an impact on their spiritual and moral development, that this wrongdoing was the first to come to mind. Since most sins recalled were years ago for the participants, many participants mentioned how the passage of time helped them to work through their feelings of guilt and regret. One participant mentioned, "It was only with the passage of time and continued prayer for forgiveness and strength that I felt better and ultimately felt forgiven."

### **Various Proactive Strategies Utilized in Confession**

In addition to the passage of time helping to resolve guilt, almost all of the participants utilized the more proactive strategy of confessing their wrongdoing. And, in fact, many confessed to more than one source—God, the person wronged, a religious leader (e.g., Sacrament of Reconciliation), family members or friends not involved, or occasionally a therapist. One participant mentioned, "I work through things by journaling and praying—but

also recently by going to counseling. Talking through it was sort of my last step. I'm a very internal processor." In addition, some responded to their misdeed by delving deeper into religious faith through repentance, becoming a Christian, or studying Scripture on their sin and God's forgiveness and mercy. Interestingly, it was noted that those participants who participated in the Sacrament of Reconciliation felt more of an immediate relief and joy which lasted than those who privately prayed to God or just talked with another person. Other than the immediate feelings of relief after confession for Catholics who used the Sacrament of Reconciliation, there were no significant differences between Catholics and Protestants in their responses to the six descriptive questions.

The question can be raised, does time heal all wounds, or does time heal wounds that are cleansed by confession? Among those who confessed outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation time appeared to have a cleansing and healing effect. Yet, not everyone confessed. Some rationalized their sin based on how much it appeared to affect others. One participant stated, "I justified it—it didn't hurt anyone else." Later, this participant acknowledged a further desensitizing toward the sin after talking about it with family and friends. It is interesting, though, that this participant still recalled this particular misdeed for the purposes of this study, implying some sort of persistent moral conviction despite the person's efforts to justify the action.

For others, time has simply not healed the wound. That is, some have not yet resolved their guilt. One participant wrote, "It is not completely resolved, but I am dealing with it through setting boundaries and understanding why." However, unresolved guilt was the exception as the majority of the participants had worked through most or all of their guilt.

### **Confession as Self-Directed and Other-Directed**

What motivated people to confess or talk through guilty feelings? For many, it was a self-care strategy. The most commonly expressed motivation was a desire to experience a sense of relief. One respondent shares:

The motivation to confess the misdeed was an overwhelming enormous sense of guilt and the



thought that I was a bad person. I don't think I confessed with the idea that I could get it off my chest and be rid of it and be forgiven. I think I needed relief—to have it all brought to light and exposed. This priest/friend was my best shot at risking total honesty.

It is clear that just expressing feelings of regret and sorrow helped many of the participants psychologically feel better. Talking through the guilt, most often with another person in addition to God, helped the participants to feel known and carry less of a secret, take ownership of the sin, find another perspective, and just rid themselves of negative emotions focused on self and others.

Another common motivator for confession—also related to self-care—was the importance of being forgiven. Many sought forgiveness by talking with the person(s) wronged and/or through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This participant expressed the longing for forgiveness well.

I felt bad for what I had done. I felt like a bad person and as though I had failed in God's eyes. I wanted to receive some kind of forgiveness. At least by talking to someone else, maybe then I would realize I wasn't the only person going through what I had experienced.

In addition, this participant expressed another common motivator, which was to receive clarity, justify, or find understanding that others also had struggled with the same sin. Expressing guilt to others has more than just a "release valve" purpose of experiencing relief. Confession also brings about a new perspective on the self; it helps people not feel alone in their struggles.

Many of the respondents found this new perspective and assurance of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Those who sought out the Sacrament of Reconciliation did so for a several reasons—it was their faith tradition, to receive absolution or hear the words that they are forgiven, to be held accountable for repentance, to receive counsel, and to express to God and a priest burdens of guilt which weighed heavily upon them. One participant stated:

I knew in my heart that what the priest was saying was true but I was trying to hide from the Truth. I found my reaction to the priest's words (which I firmly believe were for me from the Holy Spirit) simultaneously funny and humbling. That is so like God—He lovingly directed me to the Truth without causing me "horror" at my spirit. But I was very humbled and knew that I needed and desperately wanted forgiveness.

Though the most prevalent motivators for confessing wrongdoing were self-directed (finding personal relief from guilt), other common themes involved other-directed motives. These were either religious in nature, where God was the other person, or the focus was on the person that had been harmed. For example, "I love God and I want to live a holy life that pleases Him. I rest in His love and acceptance of me in Christ, yet I desire to please Him by confessing sin and working hard to be more obedient." Whether explicitly expressed or not, many of the participants implied a desire to grow closer to God, to repair the wrong they had done, and to love God and others more purely according to God's principles.

This shift from a self-focus to an outward focus, or putting aside self-oriented desires for the good of others, was expressed by a number of respondents. This focus—whether inward or outward—impacts a person's ability to experience positive outcomes from confession. Consistent with Tangney's (1991) findings, respondents in this current study mentioned the importance of other-centeredness and an increased sensitivity to how their own actions impact other people. One participant wrote:

I was feeling guilt and remorse for what I had done. After I went to confession to the priest, I felt the weight of guilt lifted. But, I also needed to make reparations and ask forgiveness from the person I had wronged. I felt embarrassed about my wrongdoing and feared that I would not be forgiven. When forgiveness was obtained, I felt a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders and a wave of relief came over me.



### **Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Effects of Confession**

The distinction between self-directed and other-directed motives brought many benefits of confession. Some benefits were intrapsychic whereas others were interpersonal. Many participants expressed experiencing both types of benefits to confession. Paradoxically, the intrapsychic benefits of talking about or confessing sin—which were endorsed by most participants—came about through the interpersonal process of conversation.

Inner feelings of guilt motivated the respondents to express uncomfortable thoughts and feelings by talking to others and to God, even if just for the purpose of sharing and processing their feelings. One participant stated, “I feel like saying it ‘out loud’ makes me take responsibility for the misdeed. Sometimes I can get a different perspective when I talk to someone else.” Another participant states, “In the case of speaking to the counselor, it helps me to work through what I’m actually feeling because that has always been difficult for me.”

Though a desire to be relieved of the burden of guilt motivated many, just expressing sorrow over sin was not sufficient to relieve the guilt. Respondents had interpersonal goals as well—they needed to know that they were forgiven, sometimes by God and sometimes by the person(s) wronged. Then, out of love for God and others, many expressed the need to repent—to change their attitude and actions to reflect a Christ-like love. However, this often took time and a continual reminder of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and love through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection for their sins. For example:

I was seeing a Christian counselor. She helped me see God's love, His forgiveness and His mercy. She also helped me to look at my sin as a chance to grow in relationship with Christ rather than hiding from Him. I came to accept that God's love is unconditional - and that my love should reflect His.

### **Growth Through Confession**

Spiritual and character growth resulting from the process of confessing wrongdoing was expressed by many respondents. This growth included becoming wiser and closer to God, and knowing their own weaknesses more. For

example, “I feel I know who I am. I know and can admit my shortfalls. I can make myself a better person from it and I am a stronger person from it.”

Part of the process which helped the respondents understand themselves better, grow in wisdom, and grow closer to God involved hearing from others affirmation of their strengths in addition to their faults.

It was a beautiful and healing thing in this process to hear truth—that I am not the sum of my good and bad deeds, and that God is at work in me bringing about a good person. She reminded me of how I am Christ-like, and how the sin itself isn't even one I would ever want to repeat. In essence, her calling out the good within me, and reminding me that I am forgiven eternally, gave me the freedom to think, dream, and be whoever I now wanted to be, regardless of my past.

This respondent clearly expressed the importance of hearing another person affirm his or her Christ-likeness within, with a call toward repentance. This person also conveyed the importance of knowing that self-identity is not dependent on good works or failings, but on a relationship with a forgiving and merciful God. Many respondents echoed the same emotional and cognitive changes arising out of confession of sin. Respondents who could see both their strengths and failures were able to grasp and cling to God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Growth through confession seems to highlight the complexity and paradox embedded in the human condition. People who have felt the guilt of sin and then confessed it as wrong, seem to have a capacity to see themselves as multidimensional, capable of good and bad, of strengths and weaknesses. Many respondents shared a similar view of being able to accept both sins and strengths within themselves, to try to change, and to accept God’s forgiveness. For example:

Because of the nature of my wrongful actions, I am reminded of my weakness in certain areas. I am reminded of how Peter felt after he displayed his weakness. I am therefore reminded of the importance of committing all



things to the Lord, especially in day to day events. It reminds me of the old bumper sticker: "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." I am told not to dwell on my failures, but to thank God for His forgiveness, and then progress in my daily walk, seeking His wisdom in all of my human transactions.

### **Experiencing Forgiveness, or Not**

The robust psychological literature on forgiveness is replete with theoretical perspectives and clinical models for granting forgiveness. It is striking how sparse the psychological literature appears on the importance of receiving forgiveness. The respondents in this study emphasized the healing effects of being forgiven.

This ability to understand and accept God's forgiveness and love aids in experiencing lasting relief and thankfulness. Overcoming guilt is significantly related to a person's view of God and acceptance of God's forgiveness and mercy (Murray-Swank, 2003) and, paradoxically, accepting God's forgiveness and mercy helps a person overcome guilt. Several participants shared that it was their faith and acceptance of God's forgiveness and love that encouraged confession of wrongdoing, leading to a release of feelings of guilt. Recalling feelings after confession, one participant stated:

I think it's important to remember that Christ wants to heal and comfort us. By His death and resurrection, no sin of mine can ever keep me from His love. That kind of mercy is transformative—makes me more merciful and forgiving in my own relationships. I remember that I, too, am dust.

As this respondent shares, experiencing God's transformative love through confessing wrongdoing helps us to be more merciful and forgiving toward others.

Unfortunately, not every participant experienced lasting relief and thankfulness after confessing sins. Some respondents conveyed that they experienced an initial feeling of relief but soon felt a deeper regret and lingering guilt. This appeared to occur when a person could not accept forgiveness from God or was prevented from seeking forgiveness with the person wronged. This is clearly expressed by another participant:

Telling others of my wrongdoing made me feel a tiny bit better, because at least I had awareness that what I had done was wrong. But because I will never have the opportunity to apologize to the person whom I hurt, I believe my feelings of guilt will never be resolved.

Another respondent describes how the response of the one offended can influence the experience of confession:

There was a sudden, deep rush of relief and harmony and a rush of peace, but this was bittersweet as it was coupled with a sense of disappointment in myself. This person had not known beforehand what I had done and I felt sadness for the person's new hurt and shock, and thus newer pangs of guilt. Because of this, I began to question the act of confession.

Resolution with the person wronged appears to be paramount to experiencing freedom from guilt, with an ability to move past the pain.

Experiencing forgiveness did not seem a linear or predictable process among these respondents. Some experienced initial relief after confession and then deep lingering regret, whereas others described initial pain and struggle after confession, with a resultant peace and acceptance of God's forgiveness after the passage of time. This latter theme supports the findings of a previous study where a sense of peace and acceptance of forgiveness occurred only after time passed (Murray-Swank, 2003). This respondent echoes this perspective of several participants:

Afterward there was a time of rebuilding trust and reconstructing relationship. I still feel guilty sometimes but it is in a different way. Now I know that it has been dealt with. I guess it is now a feeling of remorse and not guilt.

Accepting God's forgiveness often happened after the respondents took time to repair human relationships. Yet, even after dealing with the damaging effects on other people, a degree of remorse and regret remained for many of the respondents.



### **Future Directions**

This study has both strengths and limitations. The participants are from various U.S. geographical locations with a mean age of 48.8 (range 18 to 81), thus drawing from a variety of life experiences and cultural views. Though Catholicism is represented as the faith tradition of 66% of the respondents, the remainder is from a variety of Protestant denominations and a small number of non-church attendees. Thus, the sample gives rise to responses that are more representative of U.S. Christianity than just drawing from one denomination. In addition to these strengths, some limitations are present in the study. This study was exploratory, intended to generate relevant questions for future study within this field. Thus, with its small sample size of 91 participants, lack of quantitative data, and almost homogenous ethnic group (87% Caucasian), it cannot be viewed as representative of the views of the U.S. culture. Also, we lacked knowledge about the respondents' mental health and the resulting impact on their perception of working through guilt via confession. Clearly, the presence of any underlying psychological difficulties would impact the respondents' responses—perhaps showing an inability to reflect on past wrongdoings and guilt, or to resolve the presence of guilt and shame. As with any survey, this study may be plagued with a response bias problem. That is, those who chose to complete the online questions may differ systematically from those who chose not to complete it. For example, perhaps those who have not worked through their guilt at all would be reluctant to participate. Also, many church leaders, pastors, priests, and people of religious vocations were reluctant to participate due to issues of confidentiality with the researcher. As a result, the majority of the participants were lay members of churches.

Future studies could follow up on the present findings while mitigating some of the limitations of this study. Because this study mainly focused on the motivation, avenues of confession, and emotional and cognitive perceptions of those who confessed or talked about their sins, it would be helpful to study the relationship of these areas to psychological and spiritual health using quantitative methods. Future quantitative studies would allow for comparisons that are unable to be made with this qualitative data. Specifically, it

would be interesting to know how Catholics and Protestants might differ in overcoming guilt through confession, how people of differing age may vary on their views of confession, and how men and women may differ on overcoming guilt through confession.

Another area beneficial to further study includes assessing how forgiveness is important in overcoming feelings of guilt. Since there is a paucity of studies about receiving forgiveness, a quantitative study in this area would be beneficial. Another valuable area for future study is the effect of a person's foundational beliefs regarding his or her self-worth and relationship with God and how confession impacts this. Closely related to this is how psychological and spiritual health affects an individual's awareness of personal sin and strengths. Similarly, it would be helpful to study how a person's foundational beliefs in God's character and love affect attitudes regarding confession. Lastly, adding religious and spiritual dimensions to previous investigations of health, confession, and guilt (Pennebaker, Hughes, and O'Heeron, 1987) would benefit both psychologists and church leaders.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study ventured into the realm of how people of various ages and life circumstances make meaning of confession—addressing how people perceive confession as affecting their psychological well-being. It seems that the majority of the participants found confession of wrongdoing as having a long-lasting positive effect on their psychological well-being, though the means for arriving at this positive state were richly varied. Guilt over past wrongdoing was most often resolved through a combination of different modes of confession. The motivators for confessing guilt were also varied. In addition, respondents experienced many emotional and cognitive changes after confession. Most reported feeling a great sense of relief and thankfulness which lasted. Others reported that time to process the guilt, receiving forgiveness from God and the person(s) wronged, changing their behavior and attitudes, and understanding both strengths and weaknesses within themselves aided in overcoming feelings of guilt.



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