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Seven Deadly Sentiments

By [Kathleen McGowan](#) -- Publication Date: Jan/Feb 2004

Summary: Introducing the shameful feelings that many people have but few admit.



In our confessional culture, it is socially acceptable--even fashionable--to disclose your sexual predilections, your husband's problem with painkillers, your penchant for high colonics. Our hypertherapeutic society lets it all hang out.

But plenty of feelings remain in the closet. In the privacy of our own heads, we cringe with dread when we meet someone in a wheelchair, wish our aged relatives would hurry up and die, smirk over our friends' bad taste and think babies are ugly and annoying. Meanwhile, we assure ourselves--and one another--that we're really very nice people.

Evolutionary psychology holds that these shameful feelings are hardwired--strategies that led to success on the Pleistocene savanna. If that's so, then why are they so hard to admit to? "Given that these emotions are shaped by natural selection and are innate, or at least pretty deep, why do we expend so much effort in denying them?" asks Dylan Evans, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom.

It's a good question. The persistence of forbidden feelings fascinated Freud, and provided the raw material for his controversial theory of repression and the all-powerful unconscious. Both psychoanalysis and Catholic absolution are rooted in the idea that confession can strip taboo thoughts of their crippling power. Whether or not you believe in Freud (or the Virgin Mary), one thing is for sure: Our efforts to banish or explain away these unmentionables can't keep them from roaring back--and making us feel terrible as a result.

Acting on a nasty impulse may be cause for shame. But why feel so guilty about a feeling that remains a mere fancy, harmlessly stashed away in your brain? Evans theorizes that this guilt really stems from the fear of exposure. We're braced for discovery, even though we haven't really done anything. "If you're discovered doing something wrong, and you immediately feel terrible about it, the offense is mitigated," he says. "So you better be ready to display guilt if someone discovers you."

Feelings of shame trigger deeper unrest than the simple fear of being found out does, says psychiatrist Michael Lewis, author of *Shame: The Exposed Self*. Guilt is a response to bad behavior. Shame, on the other hand, "is so powerful because it's about a defective self," he says. In shame, explains Lewis, the very self is "rotten and no good." That's why intense feelings of shame can actually drive people into shameless behavior, such as jealous rage.

Yet a bit of bad feeling can be good. Emotions like shame or pride can serve as psychic regulators, Lewis says, and a healthy amount of shame may prevent you from impulsively doing something you'd later regret, such as slapping your bratty son. "We don't want to live in a world in which there is no shame or guilt," he says. "We want just enough to help us not do some of the awful things we could do."

So how to cope with the realization that you bitterly resent your successful friends and fantasize about your wife's yoga instructor? According to Lewis, there are three lines of attack: Forget about it over time, confess it or laugh about it. In laughter, he says, "you can move away from yourself and look in, saying: 'Who could believe it! How stupid!'"

With that in mind, Psychology Today presents the following guilt-provoking, squirm-inducing, I'm-such-a-lousy-person thoughts. Just remember: These seven "deadly" sentiments don't consign us to hell or block spiritual progress, as the cardinal sins are said to do. At worst, they remind us that we're not quite as nice as we'd like to believe we are. And at best, they may be able to help us understand the deeper reasons behind our wicked thoughts--and forgive ourselves our own trespasses. Here's to shame in moderation.

Crippling Anxiety "I don't know what to say to her."

We all know that the physically disabled can be every bit as smart, empathetic or, let's face it, annoying as the rest of us. (Those who still cling to the image of the "saintly paralytic" need look no further than Larry Flynt to be dissuaded from that stereotype.) But you wouldn't know any of this from watching normally gregarious adults go to pieces while trying to chat with someone in a wheelchair. Being paraplegic isn't contagious--nor is missing an arm, or being blind, or having a harelip. So why do so many people react with horror when meeting a person with an obvious deformity or disability?

It's a fairly common, fairly embarrassing response. To wit: A continent-wide European poll found that while most people (80 percent) claim that they themselves feel "at ease" around the disabled, more than half believe that "other people" probably aren't so sanguine. Something doesn't compute.

"It's not politically correct to say so, but there are obvious evolutionary reasons why we'd expect an almost instinctual aversion toward people with disfigurement," says Evans. "Our ancestors who didn't have that feeling and continued to mate with people with disfigurements were more likely to have children with disfigurements, making the offspring less likely to survive." Such revulsion is by no means a foolproof strategy for producing healthy children, admits Evans, but over time the aversion might provide a selective advantage.

There's another explanation: Disabled people may simply remind the rest of us of our own physical vulnerability and mortality. Not surprisingly, the aversion may be stronger when the person in question is a stranger. One French study found that subjects who don't know any physically handicapped people are much more likely to react immediately with feelings of fear and disgust. In contrast, those with handicapped relatives rarely register such emotions.

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Even those who don't flinch at the sight of physical deformity may be socially uncomfortable around someone with a handicap. Often that's no more than the simple awkwardness that stems from the fear of breaking rules of etiquette--or looking like a jerk. This social fear embellishes the more innate feelings, suggests Don Freedheim, emeritus professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. As kids we have a natural curiosity about disabled people that adults try to squelch, he says: "Parents say, 'Shh, don't say that,' and the child may be forced into feeling that it's bad to be different." A little education about disability, says Freedheim, can go a long way.

Emotional Rubbernecking: "Funerals Can Be Fun."

You've probably met them at wakes: They are the apparently bereft third cousins (once removed), or the weepy friends who neglect to mention that they haven't seen the deceased in 10 years. They are emotional rubberneckerers, secretly proud to claim an intimate connection to the dead.

Why jump on the bandwagon, when the bandwagon is a hearse? There are self-serving reasons: Evolutionary psychologists argue that the public expression of grief boosts your reputation as a trustworthy member of the community. Psychoanalysts, on the other hand, hold that excessive displays of grief mask unconscious guilt at our own survival. Grieving may also serve an existential function; in mourning others we wrestle with our own certain demise. But that doesn't explain why some people enthusiastically strike up the dirge for folks they hardly know.

People ally themselves with the dead for the same reason they tell fantastic tales or streak naked through the college quad: to command attention. The awe and reverence conferred on the newly dead can be ours by association. "People become overinvolved with death because they feel important through identification with the event," says Robert Reich, a New York City psychiatrist. Many people "overdo" funerals or lament the loss of a reviled spouse as a play for sympathy and attention, according to Reich.

Sudden tragic death can inspire emotional rubbernecking in anyone. (How many of us have boasted about near misses--say, driving through an intersection five minutes before a fatal crash?) A national catastrophe such as September 11 brings this behavior out of the woodwork. That fall, people felt compelled to disclose that they had friends or friends of friends in the World Trade Center. New Yorkers morbidly compared notes: How close were you? What did you see? Who did you know? (In this creepy social gambit, the "winner" is the person most directly affected by the attack.) The same calculus was at work in other states or countries, where the comparison was not what you saw firsthand but who you knew in New York City or Washington, D.C.

To be sure, there are more admirable reasons people advertise their connection to a newsworthy event. Tragedies such as 9/11 or Kennedy's assassination heighten the communal bond that sociologists refer to as group cohesion. Crime often dips in the immediate aftermath, and people feel kinship with the grieving families whether they know them or not. Anyone who watches such cataclysmic events unfold can somehow claim them as their own. Emotional rubbernecking is another way of saying, "I was there--and I survived."

Schadenfreude "She had it coming to her."

Why do we hate Martha Stewart? Is it her icy, lipless smile, her piles of cash, her talent at making every American feel like a domestic failure? None of this can account for the nationwide glee over the possibility that she might do jail time. The only thing that really explains it is schadenfreude: the spiteful delight at seeing someone else flounder. Whether the belly flop is courtesy of Dennis Kozlowski or the high-school prom queen, nothing's more satisfying than witnessing a former victor turned into a washout.

From an evolutionary point of view, it makes perfect sense: Seeing rivals fail is satisfying because it would seem to leave more opportunity for us. "If we're both doing badly, but you do even worse, because it's a relative advantage it makes me [seem] better off," explains Evans. Glee, or even just relief, at this "advantage" lifts the mood.

But schadenfreude is much more disturbing when we feel it toward our friends. Licking your chops over Martha's downfall is a neighborly spectator sport. Admitting that you resent your husband's fame is another matter. Norman Feather, emeritus professor of psychology at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, thinks that this messier version of schadenfreude emerges from our sense of fairness. We resent seeing anyone glory in success that isn't earned, even if it's a relative or an intimate. As a result, their comeuppance is gratifying. People who feel they've gotten a raw deal are especially likely to give in to this feeling. "The resentment you feel [about your own situation] can feed into the resentment you feel toward others," says Feather. "That can be dangerous."

Normally, etiquette requires us to cloak our resentment of friends, family and colleagues. Celebrities, on the other hand, make perfect targets, since who could possibly deserve all that fawning attention? Perhaps we should be nicer to Martha. After all, she gives us a rare opportunity to publicly bond over our dirty little secret--failure is fun to watch.

Playing Favorites "Why can't you be more like your sister?"

"You love him more!" must be second only to "It's not faaaaiiiir" among the top howls of childhood. Who hasn't felt at some point that they were getting cheated out of their fair share of parental affection? And what parent hasn't felt his or her heart unequally divided among the kids--at least temporarily?

It's not so embarrassing to admit that you treat your kids differently--"parental differential treatment" is fairly common, explains Susan McHale, a professor of human development at Pennsylvania State University. In her research, about a quarter of parents admit it. Kids say it's much more common: One-half to two-thirds say they and their siblings are treated differently. (Parents probably underestimate and kids probably exaggerate, researchers note.)

Real favoritism, on the other hand, is a darker secret. Evolutionary theories hold that parents should invest more care and energy in the stronger child, who is more likely to survive to reproductive age.

But at least one empirical study finds the opposite. Mothers actually tend to favor adult children who have had setbacks like illness or divorce, as long as the problems were due to bad luck rather than personal failings. In this case, the suffering brought Mom and kid closer together. Birth order and gender also have something to do with it, says McHale. Moms tend to prefer the youngest. Sons more often pal around with Dad; daughters gravitate toward Mom. Spending more time together doesn't necessarily translate into a

deeper love, but it can be interpreted as favoritism.

The good news: Despite our egalitarian urges, we shouldn't feel compelled to treat our children exactly the same--or feel guilty when we don't. Most kids think their parents treat them fairly, even if they don't treat them exactly the same. Children who get less warmth and affection than their siblings, though, often suffer. If one child appears to get more than his fair share of affection, says McHale, parents "should talk about the concrete things they do to express affection--as opposed to how they really feel," says McHale. For example, she says, a boy who is free-spirited and independent may not get the same cuddling that his needy little sister does. But as long as the parents openly discuss the difference in treatment, the kids should do OK. Deep-down dislikes are another matter, she cautions: "If you really have a strong preference for one kid, it is very important to be evenhanded in your outward behavior."

Money Matters "If I earn more, I'm worth more."

We like to think that we don't judge a man by his checkbook. Truth is, we often try to figure out who has the bigger wallet--and feel a warm wash of smugness when we win the contest. Tim Kasser, a psychologist at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, has written extensively on materialism. He points out that this shallowness may have deep roots. All primates are status-conscious, since we need to keep track of our ranking in the social order. Some cultures have potlatches; others prize spirituality. In our society, the main way to measure status is money--and as a result, many come to believe in the Gilded Age myth that a man is worthy merely if he's wealthy.

Needless to say, most people try to hide this preoccupation with the pocketbook. Kasser thinks that the guilt flows from the deep-seated knowledge that the quest to find happiness through cash is futile. "Most people have an intuitive sense that the [materialistic] messages of consumer society are just wrong," he says. Our basic needs--for safety, social connection, self-respect--aren't really satisfied by extra cash. But admitting that disconnect can be traumatic. It forces people to reevaluate their lives, says Kasser, "and generally people don't really want to do that."

Other research, however, shows that financial smugness may pack a reward. Michael Hagerty of the Graduate School of Management at the University of California at Davis has shown that people are happier when they can compare "down" as well as "up." The average person may not feel very happy in a society with a visible class of superrich. Having poor people around, on the other hand, seems to make middling people feel pretty good by comparison. Shades of social Darwinism--except Hagerty ultimately found that societies with growing incomes and a relatively equal distribution of wealth tend to be happiest overall.

Grief relief "Thank God it's finally over."

Chris McGonigle didn't cry at her husband's funeral. After logging 15 years by his sickbed as multiple sclerosis slowly destroyed his body, the writer's eyes were completely dry: "I had cried all my tears over the years he was ill." In fact, McGonigle--who wrote the recently released *Liberating Losses: When Death Brings Relief*--felt both relief and guilt over his death. She was thankful he was no longer suffering, but also admits she was "glad that I was free to move on with my life."

That sentiment doesn't mean we love the dying any less. It simply means we are also ready to dedicate emotional and physical energy to the future. But feeling anything other than shirt-rending grief can be hard to admit. The spouse or relative of a long-suffering loved one may act quite differently in private than he or she lets on in public--and can feel alienated and ashamed as a result.

It may seem isolating, but many people are ambivalent about the death of an intimate, says Jean Miller, a thanatologist at the University of Rhode Island. "People with strong and loving bonds to the dying often feel ambivalence about wanting their loved one to die in order to obtain relief for the dying and [for] themselves," says Miller. "Persons with weak bonds to the dying also experience ambivalence, since they may have unfinished business and feel both relieved and guilty about their relationship with the dying." She estimates that about 75 percent of mourners have mixed feelings in the face of death.

Jennifer Elison, McGonigle's coauthor, struggled with another version of this ambivalence: The day after she asked her domineering husband for a divorce, he died in a car accident. Nobody in her small town understood her conflicted emotions, since her husband had been a well-respected doctor. In this type of situation, says McGonigle, "We feel confused, guilty, ashamed and--because we may not be able to share this feeling--isolated."

Adulterous fantasy "It's not cheating if it happens in my head."

Sex is as much between the ears as it is between the sheets, and mature adults often celebrate the power of fantasy. "I am rarely with the person I am with, so to say," Truman Capote wrote in one of his novels. "I'm sure that many of us, even most of us, share this condition of dependence upon an inner scenery, imagined and remembered erotic fragments, shadows irrelevant to the body above or beneath us."

Sexual fantasies are nothing you can't hear people blabbing about on daytime TV. Yet when images of former (or imaginary) lovers intrude into our sex lives, they can set off a chain of worries. If I'm fantasizing that the wife is the sexy new nanny, does that mean I no longer love the missus? Or if I pretend that my spare-tire-sporting boyfriend is Brad Pitt, could that mean I'm really capable of cheating? Fantasies seem to tell us more about our potential behavior than we'd like to admit.

But most experts dispel the idea that hot thoughts lead to betrayal--in fact, sex therapists routinely encourage their clients to fantasize. So are sexually confident 21st-century adults supposed to share their most intimate reveries? Not necessarily. "These fantasies are almost always best kept private, because if there's one thing more common in human beings than fantasizing, it's jealousy," says Michael Bader, author of *Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies*.

In contrast, Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist at the University of Washington in Seattle and the author of *Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong*, says that honesty is the best policy--as long as the subject is approached with discretion. She advises sharing fantasies "delicately, modestly--until you work up to the big dark cosmos of eros and see if your partner can take it." While being truthful about your fantasy life is tough, Schwartz says that candor is "usually intimacy-producing, and therefore gratifying. But that is a leap that surprisingly few take."

"Grief Relief" and "Adulterous Fantasy" by Ken Gordon.

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