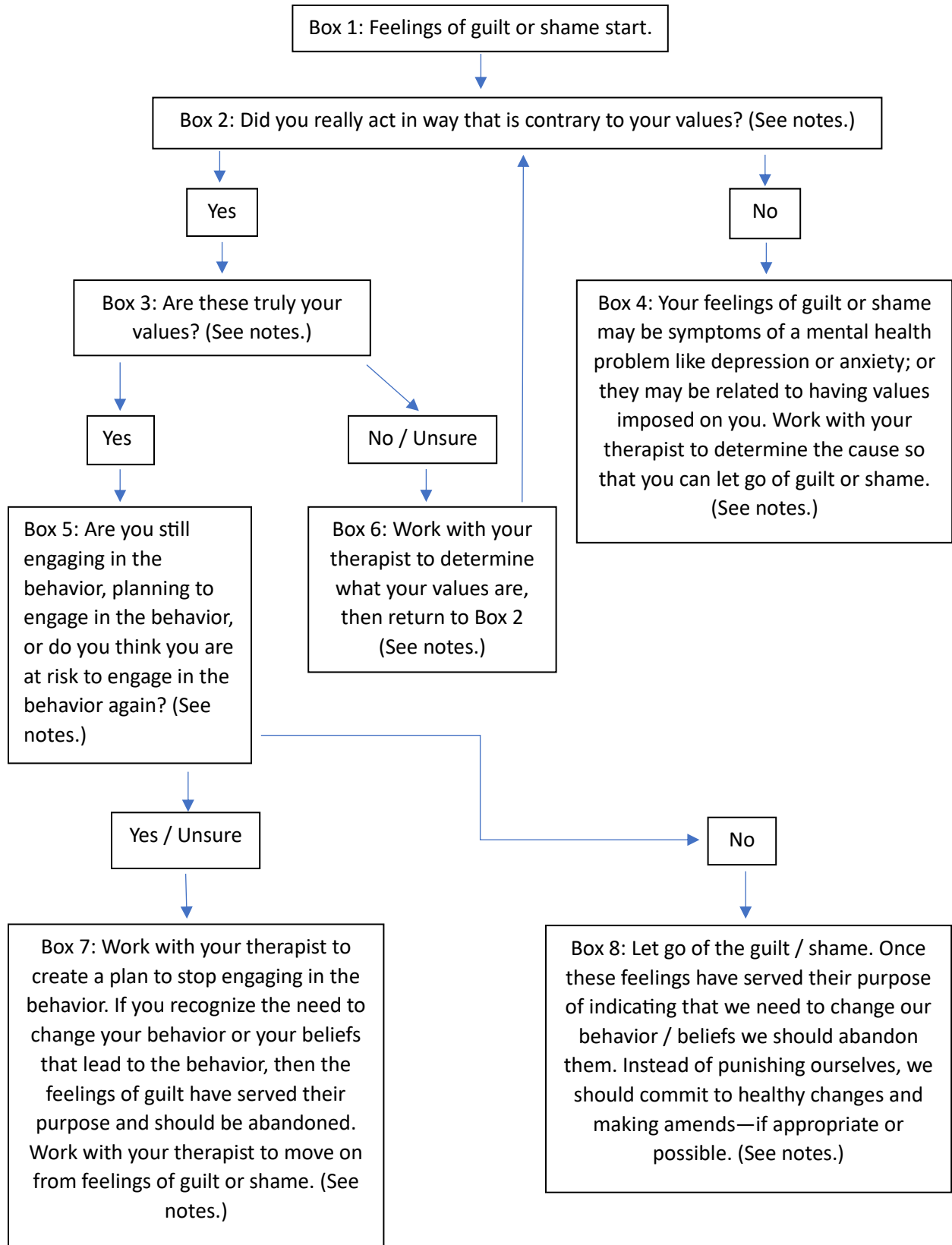


REBT Guilt and Shame Flow Chart



REBT Guilt and Shame Flow Chart

Notes:

Box 1 note: It may be helpful to note when and why these feelings started. Did they come about because of some event? For example, did you face criticism or get into trouble? Or did they arise because of personal reflection on your behavior? If someone is criticizing us it is important to determine if that criticism is valid or if it should be wholly or partially rejected.

Box 2 note: Sometimes people have “inappropriate guilt” or feelings of shame when there is no rational reason for feeling this way. For example, a person may feel shameful when they didn’t do anything contrary to their own values, or they didn’t do anything that wouldn’t be expected of a person in their position. Inappropriate guilt can be a symptom of mental health problems like depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. In some instances, we feel guilty or shameful because others have told us that we should feel this way (either explicitly, or implicitly—such as through messages in the media, in sermons, in commentary, etc.) Upon critical examination the individual may find that they don’t actually share these values. Values and ethics in general can be explored in greater depth together in therapy. If you find yourself enmeshed in a value system that you don’t agree with it may take a lot of planning to get yourself out of that situation or work on making existing within that system tolerable.

Box 3 note: If you are unsure about your values this can be explored in therapy. To assist in determining or developing your values your therapist may have you engage in a “values exercise”. Remember that we want to evaluate our actions, but refrain from applying *global* labels (such as “good” or “bad”) to ourselves as a person (see “global labeling” on the common thinking errors handout).

Box 4 note: As mentioned above feelings of “inappropriate guilt” or shame can be a symptom of mental health problems like depression or anxiety. Alternatively, these feelings may be due to having values imposed on you by others (examples: the dominant culture, your family, religious authorities, etc.). Critical examination may reveal that you do not share these values.

Box 5 note: We may recognize that a behavior is against our values, while still feeling compelled to engage in that behavior. Working with a therapist can help you develop a plan to stop engaging in the behavior.

Box 6 note: Critical examination of our values and engaging in values exercises helps to determine what our actual values are. It is up to the individual to choose their own values. They may choose to adopt the values of their family, the culture or subculture they identify with, their religion or philosophy of life, or they may choose to develop their own values (or stand by their own values if they already have developed their own). The therapist’s job is to help you determine what your values are—not to impose any particular values on you. One caveat here is that a person’s values should be reasonably pro-social (beneficial to the individual and beneficial or neutral to others, as well). If one wants to adopt anti-social values (values that are beneficial to themselves but harmful to others; or harmful to everyone, themselves included) that is their choice, but these values are likely to cause problems for the individual (and others), especially in the long-run. Your therapist can help you think about the possible implications of your values.

Box 7 note: Once you realize that you need to change your behavior, or the beliefs that lead to that behavior, the feelings of guilt have served their purpose and should be discarded. When you let go of

REBT Guilt and Shame Flow Chart

guilt and shame you are better able to focus on developing new, adaptive (healthy) beliefs and behaviors. (Also see Box 8 note.)

Box 8 note: We cannot control the past, but we can control what we do with what we have learned from our experiences—we can turn bad experiences from our past into important life lessons that lead to beneficial changes. If we choose to punish ourselves with feelings of unproductive guilt (guilt that continues after we have made a commitment to change) or shame—which paralyzes us with depression and/or anxiety—we get stuck in self-condemnation or self-hatred and this prevents us from making beneficial (beneficial to ourselves and others) changes in our lives. Punishing ourselves helps no one and only adds to the suffering in the world. A much healthier approach is to make a commitment to living a better life. When we choose to start living a better (more pro-social—that is, beneficial to ourselves and others) life we can go on to do good in the world. Starting off, we can work to examine why we acted the way we did, so we can avoid making the same mistake in the future; we can make amends (if possible and appropriate); and we can adopt new, helpful beliefs that will help us to live a more contented and ethical life. A philosophy of life can be very helpful in helping us live a better life, as it provides us with ethical and practical instruction (a philosophy of life can be secular or religious, it's entirely up to you). Your therapist can assist you in exploring philosophies of life or you may do this research on your own. You may even decide to develop your own philosophy of life if none of the existing philosophies appeal to you.