

Content note: This article discusses the aftermath of coercion, survival guilt, moral injury, self-forgiveness after harm, and impossible choices.

If you'd like to create your own copy, please hit "file" and "make a copy".

And if you are in a situation that is unsafe, or where you may be monitored, please consider reading some digital safety tips, linked below.

<https://graytoclearsupportiveservices.base44.app/DigitalSafetyTips>

It may bring up heaviness, numbness, anger, grief, or somatic reactions like tension, pressure, or dissociation.

If you need to pause, take breaks, or come back later, please do. Move at your own pace.

This article is not a replacement for clinical or legal services — though I understand those may be difficult to access right now, depending on your situation.

Take what resonates, leave what doesn't, and protect your own emotional and physical safety while reading.

There are realities in dangerous situations that most people never want to acknowledge. Sometimes survival comes down to a choice no human being should ever have to make:

"Their life" or "my life."

And exploitative dynamics are no different.

This article is for many people — people who carry guilt so heavy and so complicated that ordinary reassurance doesn't touch it.

It's for you if:

- You want to understand one of the most confusing forms of guilt a person can experience
- You did something you wish you didn't have to, but it kept you alive; and it felt like what you did was the only option for you to stay that way.
- You were coerced, manipulated, tricked, or forced into something you now see as awful.
- You made mistakes too, and part of you believes you could have prevented what happened

- You were loyal, obligated, threatened, or trapped in a situation where every option was a bad one.
- You were a different person then, and you're only now seeing the full picture

I'm not going to tell you:

"It's not your fault."

"You did what you had to do."

"It's okay."

Not because those things aren't true — they might be.
But because you've probably heard them already, and they didn't land.

I'm not here to fight your shame or argue with your memories.
I'm not here to sanitize what happened or pretend it was simple.

I'm here to say something different:

You're forgiven.

Not "it's fine."

Not "don't worry about it."

Not "you're absolved of everything."

Just this:

You're forgiven.

What that means is yours to decide.

I'm not here as a judge or a moral authority.

I'm just a girl who's seen things she wishes she hadn't, too — and I'm sitting with you in the complexity.

If something in these words helps loosen the weight you've been carrying, even a little, then this article has done what it needed to do.

If you're not feeling guilt or shame, but you're feeling rage — that's okay too.
This is your pain, and you deserve to process it in a way that makes sense for you.

This is just an article.

You're a person.
Do whatever you need with this information.
Check in with yourself as you go.
If you need grounding afterward, that's normal too.

I'm not going to spend too much time talking about shame itself.
We all know what that feels like.

And shame, guilt, despair, anger — especially in this context — can tear through the nervous system like a storm.

So instead of talking about emotions, I want to talk about **small ways to rebuild**.

Not to erase what happened.
Not to “move on.”

Not to pretend it didn't matter.

But to give your body and mind something to hold onto while you heal.

If you're willing, here's an exercise.

Do it in whatever order makes sense for your goals, your pace, and your capacity.

But here's the exercise — please pace yourself, and take care of yourself. If you need to take breaks, that's okay.

1. Start with the messy. What do you actually feel? Be as messy as you need. And it's okay if you don't know.
 - a. If you want some prompts, I've got you! If you don't need them, feel free answer the question in whatever way makes sense to you.
 - i. When you think about the reasons you want to read an article like this, what happens to your body?

- ii. Does it feel like you can make that feeling go away, or do you have to mask it?
- iii. When you mask it, do you notice it getting worse, better, or staying about the same?
- iv. When you think about just saying something nice to yourself in the mirror, how does that feel?
- v. When you think about anything good that others feel about you, how does that feel for you?
- vi. When you think about your future, how does it feel?
 - 1. If you don't know, that's okay. Sometimes survival is one day at a time, so let's talk about that day.
 - 2. How does today feel? Does it feel like tomorrow can happen?
 - a. It can — it will — I can't promise what tomorrow will look like but I can promise you that you can get through this. You can find peace.
 - 3. How far ahead do you feel safe thinking about? It's okay if it's not long term goals yet. We're doing this brick by brick. Whether you can only think about the next hour, tomorrow, or five years from now, you're here. I know it doesn't always feel like it — but that's a good thing.
- vii. What's one thing that feels good doing today?
- viii. Do you feel angry? That's okay. Do you want to talk about why?
- ix. Do you feel shame? That happens. No judgement, no pressure. I don't have to agree with your shame to validate your right to feel it. But if you want to talk about it, that's okay. Talk.
- x. Sometimes, when we feel like something is unforgivable, we can't forgive ourselves; but we have this life. We have this one life. Sometimes all you can really do is rebuild brick by brick. There's nothing wrong with that. You're still here, and believe it or not, that's a good thing.
- xi. Is there anything else that makes sense to put in the "messy" section? That's okay. Say whatever you need. I'm right here with you.

2. Sometimes when we can't forgive ourselves, it can start with learning how to have fun again. Not learn how to be happy, but learn how to just have one day where we had a genuine smile.
 - a. If you feel good about it, I encourage you to think about one thing you can do today that will make you laugh, smile (even if just on the inside), or just enjoy that moment.
 - b. If you can think of several things — even better.
 - c. If you can think about tomorrow — I love that for you!
 - d. If you can think past that — do it! You've got this.
3. Think about the last time a strength showed up for you. That strength can be emotional, practical, or other.
 - a. First off, hell yes! I'm so glad you can see this in yourself. You deserve that.
 - b. How does it feel?
 - c. Do you feel like you can make that happen again? I mean I definitely think you can. But I'm not the one doing this, you are. And my friend, you've got this!
 - d. Can you think of any other strengths? I feel like we're on a roll here. And hey if you can't, that's okay. But think about what feels strong to you. Think about when that shows up. Notice it. And notice you.
 - i. You still matter. Those strengths mean more than you know.
4. This one might be hard, and that's okay. But do you feel like you can say something good about yourself? It can be anything. Just take this one day, one moment, one whatever at a time.
5. I know sometimes, these things feel like they define us. I'm not going to argue with you, if you feel like this defines you right now, this is your nervous system, not mine. But one thing I noticed about life, is that different chapters happen.
 - a. Notice that you still have your life.
 - b. Notice any capabilities you haven't lost (be it mental or physical).

- c. Healing isn't about forgetting what happened, and it's not about redefining everything, it's about creating a new definition.
 - d. Is there anything that happened today, that you feel started that process? It could be anything.
 - i. A sign from the universe that told you "things will get better" (sometimes it's as simple as seeing a bug or a flower you haven't seen in a while)
 - ii. A friend that expresses love towards you.
 - iii. A family member that still protects you and does so with kindness and love.
 - iv. A close loved one that still laughs with you.
 - v. A pet that still trusts you.
 - vi. A stranger you notice you're building a connection with.
 - vii. A dream you notice calls out to you, or maybe even a change of interest in career paths.
 - viii. A new found love of boundaries.
 - ix. People who originally didn't respect those boundaries either learning to do so, or leaving your life (this is a good thing).
 - x. Maybe something not on this list?
 - xi. Just asking gently, because if this did something good for you, especially something that feels even slightly redefining, it deserves to be recognized; how does this fit that definition for you?
6. Setting goals can be helpful sometimes, especially with healing. So if I may ask, try this out.
- a. Timeframe
 - b. What is the goal?
 - c. How are you going to achieve this goal?
 - d. Will you be gentle with yourself if you don't? Please do. Sometimes we're just not there yet, and that's okay.
 - e. Do you want to try again?
 - f. Do you want to make any adjustments?

- g. What about these adjustments feel more achievable?
 - h. If you met the goal, what ways do you want to challenge yourself?
7. Do you feel like you can repeat this exercise again?

Like I said, I don't know what walk of life you're coming to this article on. But I'm so glad you took the time to read it. I hope it helps, even if just a little bit.