Stop Punishing Yourself

By *Harrison Barnes*

When I was growing up, one of my childhood friends was continually reminded by very serious Christian parents that any sort of physical contact with the opposite sex outside of marriage was wrong. His parents promised all sorts of evil that would befall him if he associated physically with girls outside of marriage. He had also been going to various Christian youth groups since a young teenager where he was lectured about the tremendous guilt and wrath he would receive from God if he engaged in physical contact with women.

When he was around 17 years old, he took his parents' car over to his girlfriend's house and the two messed around. He told me that when he left, he felt terribly guilty. He knew his parents would never find out, but the guilt was just too much. On his drive home, he took his eyes off the road, crashed his parents' car, and was injured.

When he told me about this episode, I remember finding it pretty odd. This guy was always very alert, was an exceptional athlete, and was not the sort of guy who would take his eyes off the road going 35 miles an hour down a relatively calm suburban street.

"It's always like that," he told me. "The last time I kissed a girl, I ended up just 'blanking out' completely on a math test. I got an F and I actually knew the material. For some reason I just could not concentrate."

The message that I understood from what he was saying was that *God was "striking him down" for doing evil.* That was the message that he believed. I grew up in a relatively small town in the Midwest and when I was 16 or so, this seemed to make sense to me. *Yes, this is how God works. Even if our parents do not punish us for something, God will.*

Regardless of your religion, I am sure this sort of thought process makes some sense to you. Perhaps it is not kissing a girl when you are not married. It could be theft. It could be cheating. It could be murder. Regardless of what it is, the message is that even if society does not punish us, God (or a higher power) will step in and take care of it. What about the people who do not get punished on earth? Well … the logic here is that if someone is lucky enough to escape punishment on earth, then they will end up spending eternity in hell. This is the thought process that most of Western civilization has been raised under, and it is part of the way we think. The concept of punishment sets the tone for most of us, including the quality of our psychological and even physical lives.

I am going to take a leap here and offend many people: *The reality is that it is we who are doing the punishing. If someone is not around to punish us, we go ahead and punish ourselves.*

Everyone is punished as children, adolescents, and adults by a variety of people—parents, teachers, peers, friends, bosses, society, wives, and husbands. How we are punished and how we deal with being punished has a significant impact on the quality of our careers and lives. I am sure that many of the punishments you received in the past are something you remember well. They certainly are for me.

The family I grew up in believed in spankings and similar sorts of "traditional" punishments when I did something wrong. While this is not something I will ever do with my children, there is logic to such punishments: The child does something wrong and is immediately punished for what he or she did. Ideally, after being punished, the child is forgiven and everything is back to normal. In "healthy" punishment, a bad behavior is identified and immediately punished:

- If you do something wrong in school, you are punished and then you are (generally) allowed to go on with your life.
- Socially, if you do something wrong, your friends may not be your friends anymore unless you make up to them in some way.
- If you break the law, you are fined, sent to prison, and so forth—and then the punishment is over.

Most of us very quickly learn that if we do something wrong, we will be punished in some way--and then everything will be just fine. Societal functions are based on our doing something wrong and then being forced to atone for what we did before we can move on. Societal incentives:

1. Encourage us to act properly;
2. Punish us for not acting properly; and
3. Allow us to re-enter society after being punished.

What happens, though, when there is no one around to punish us if we do something wrong? In the case of my friend who crashed his parents' car, he was punishing himself because there was no one around to do it. In fact, the concept of a "psychic" and "higher power" sort of punishment that would result from any physical contact with the opposite sex was so strong within his mind that he made sure he punished himself if no one was around to do it.

In dysfunctional families, children may be punished and then reminded of what they did for days, months, or years afterward, and made to always feel guilty about what they did wrong. I know of people who have been really messed up by families that continually put guilt on them and do not let them forget.

One of the most powerful movies I ever saw dealing with this was *Ordinary People*. This movie is about an affluent family dealing with the aftermath of the death of their son. Conrad (played by Timothy Hutton), the surviving son of a boat accident, is overcome with guilt to such an extent that he attempts suicide. Conrad's mother, Beth (played by Mary Tyler Moore), had always preferred Conrad's brother and has great difficulty supporting Conrad. This drives Conrad further and further into his guilt and self-imposed punishment. It is only when the psychiatrist Dr. Berger (played by Judd Hirsch) makes Conrad realize that he no longer has to punish himself that he is able to move on. Dr. Berger also has to help Conrad come to terms with the

fact that his mother is making him feel guilty about what happened.

How you have been punished at work and in your career in the past are important components of whether or not you will be successful in your work. If you did something wrong in your job in the past and your employer will not forgive you, then you have a serious problem. Why? Because having guilt loom over you all the time and having your employer make you feel like you need to continue punishing yourself will harm you. Why should you be in a situation where you are made to feel guilty and bad about yourself all the time? Many employers, friends, and others use guilt to exert control over us. Never put yourself in a position where you cannot be forgiven and move on. Continually feeling guilty could create all sorts of problems for you.

If you are in any professional or personal situation where you will never escape feeling guilty even after you have served your punishment, my advice for you is to get out. Guilt and the psychic punishment associated with this is too much for anyone to bear over the long term. It is hurting your success and life. You need to get free of this.

Many of the most severe problems people have in the world—self-mutilation, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, cutting, and other self-destructive behaviors—are the result of people trying to punish themselves. I have personally known two women in my life who were sexually abused by their fathers when they were teenagers. In one case, the woman attempted suicide several times. In the other case, the woman developed a habit of cutting herself on her arm after her father abused her. Feeling tremendous guilt and with no one around to punish them, these women were punishing themselves for what occurred.

Many people are (erroneously) punishing themselves so they can feel good. They have done something wrong in the past, or believe they have done something wrong, and just continue punishing themselves psychologically and physically. After some time, they may have even forgotten why they were punishing themselves. They just continue punishing themselves because they have developed the belief that this was something they needed to do in order to feel better.

Most of us typically punish ourselves due to our internal value systems that tell us when we believe we should be punished and when we believe we should feel guilt. Let's say that tomorrow you were to go out and run over someone in your car—killing that person—and then made the mistake of driving away. Furthermore, you decided that you were not going to tell the police about this—or anyone—and were just going to go on living your life normally.

My guess is that what would happen is that things would rapidly fall apart for you because you are a good person who has done something against your morals. You would start to feel terribly guilty and would probably start doing things to punish yourself.

- You might alienate people close to you, depriving yourself of friendships.
- You might get yourself fired from your job.
- You might start abusing substances.
- You might develop health problems.
- You might drop dead for no reason.
- You might have a bad accident that could have been avoided if you were more alert.

I do not know how you would punish yourself (only you do). What I do know is the odds are very good that you would punish yourself quite severely even if the law did not catch up with you.

The problem with punishing yourself, though, is that it can only hurt you. Punishing yourself will never make you feel better. In most cases, the punishment you inflict on yourself is far worse than what society would inflict on you. When you punish yourself, you are never forgiven and you can never move on. If you run someone over with your car, go to the police, and are punished, you will have paid your debt. You may still have issues you need to work through after having paid your debt to society, but at least you will have been *given permission* by society to move on.

Some relationships are like this as well. One person does something wrong and for years the other person brings it up and does not let them forget it. The punishment just keeps coming. Just as soon as the person who committed the misdeed starts to feel better, the person who was offended will drag up the supposed misdeed in an attempt to make the person feel guilty once more.

One of the most insidious and dangerous things in the world is punishment. You need to ask if you are punishing yourself for something in the past, or are you allowing others to continually and [unjustly] punish you for long-gone transgressions? Punishment can undermine your life and success. You must not allow punishment to govern the course of your life. Never punish yourself.

THE LESSON

Punishment and how you react to it are important determinants of your success. Never put yourself in a position where you cannot be forgiven and move on. Guilt leads to self-punishment, which is insidious and damaging; determine whether you are punishing yourself for something in the past, or if you are allowing others to unjustly punish you for long-ago transgressions. Such punishment can undermine your life and success.

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