

Letting Go of Unproductive Guilt

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As you go through your day, acting on information, prioritizing tasks to be accomplished, and making a myriad of decisions, you may experience guilt -- especially as you look back over those decisions and activities of the day. To begin to let go of your guilt, ask yourself these questions:

Is it guilt or is it shame that I am experiencing?

Guilt and shame are not the same thing. Guilt is about feeling remorse (or bad) over something I have done or not done. Guilt is about feeling bad about behavior - overt or covert acts. Shame is about feeling bad about who I am. It is the feeling that you are not good enough and that you will never be good enough -- no matter what you do. Shame often carries with it a feeling of vulnerability or exposure. It is a sense that others could see right through you and know that you are worth less. Guilt can turn into shame. Embarrassment is associated with shame. Guilt and shame are both associated with "shoulds". Ask yourself, "what am I actually feeling?"

What do I feeling guilty about?

Ask yourself, "What am I thinking as I feel guilty?" Did I make this decision vs. that decision? Did I spend too much time working, playing, taking care of myself? Did I spend too much, eat too much, sleep too late? Did I procrastinate, avoid other people, not do things perfectly? What am I thinking about my actions? What evaluation am I making?

If I am feeling guilty about my behavior, do I owe someone amends?

Do I owe amends to someone for having wronged them? If I do, how can I go about making those amends? If I don't owe anyone amends for my behavior, do I feel guilty because of the way I look at things? Do I expect perfection from myself?

If I don't owe amends for having harmed someone, am I experiencing guilt over conflicting choices?

Do I have values that are in conflict? An example might be that I place equally high value on being a good employee and being able to attend my children's activities. If I stay at work and miss my daughter's field trip, I am bad mother. If I leave work to attend my daughter's field trip I am a bad employee. Do I feel guilty when I get caught in seemingly "no win" situations? Can I find solutions to "no win" situations?

Do I feel guilty about not living up to unreasonable expectations of myself?

Do I have impossibly high standards or expectations for how I conduct myself or how much I get done, or the quality of "the work" I do? Do I hold others to these same standards? Do I "should" on myself, no matter how hard I try? Do I set myself up for "no win" situations with my own expectations? What kinds of things do I think that sets me up for always falling short? Can I change how I think about those things? How?