

How to deal with Guilt

Some many people struggle with guilt. Appropriate guilt as an emotion can serve a purpose in that it shows we understand when we may have offended someone, or always put our own interests before others (which isn't always a bad thing). Guilt can be a warning sign and we can chose to deal with it or ignore it.

Guilt becomes unhealthy when it is an inappropriate emotion. For example, if you feel you are a bad parent for going out to work instead of being an at home parent. Another example would be when you appropriately say no to someones request to do something, when you know it isn't possible for you to do it.

Whether the emotion is appropriate or inappropriate the emotion is triggered from an event that may occur, which then triggers a thought, then the emotion and a behaviour and a physical reaction.

The following example may explain it better:



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This cycle can be self-destructive and will damage your health and wellbeing.

If you suffer from guilt here are a few tips which may help you deal with it (and not ignore it):

1. Is the emotion helpful or unhelpful

Ask yourself whether the guilt you feel is based on fact or opinion – there is a big difference. If we feel guilt because we said or did something hurtful to ourselves or others that is an appropriate time to feel guilt. If we feel guilt because of making a decision as a parent to go back to work this is an inappropriate time to feel the emotion.

Either way, you should not ignore the emotion; you need to deal with it. Using the examples above you could choose to apologise for the hurtful action or to think more rationally about why you are going back to work – many parents go back to work and still have healthy family relationships.

2. Forgiveness and Acceptance

The past is in the past, if you did something hurtful to someone else or yourself accept it, find forgiveness and move on because you cannot change the past. You can apologise – even if the person is no longer in your life.

A tip for acceptance and forgiveness is for you to write a note asking for forgiveness – this works even if the person is no longer in your life. You can choose to burn the note or tear it up (or give it to the person you believe you hurt). You have to let go of the note though (don't keep it), this is symbolic.

If your feelings of guilt are not appropriate then seek help. Accept that the feelings of guilt are weighing you down and not allowing you to move on. This may take a little more intervention, seek help and don't ignore it.

3. Learn

It is important that you learn from your behaviour – let go of the emotion and take the lesson so that you can carry that with you to any future events that may lead you to feel guilt.

There are lots of techniques you can use here. You can learn to stop yourself before the emotion kicks in, you can ask yourself are you dealing with fact or opinion. I find it helps to write things down.

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If the feeling of guilt is inappropriate, seek help – this can be through a trained coach or you can go it alone as there are plenty of resources out there for people to use and try.

4. Don't expect so much from yourself

Sometimes we have extremely high expectations of ourselves and others. People quite often strive for perfection, when perfection doesn't really exist.

The saying 'we are only human' speaks volumes here. We all make mistakes, the key is to realise and learn from the mistakes and not hold onto emotions that are unhelpful. Holding onto unhelpful negative emotions serves no purpose whatsoever and also stops us from moving on with our lives.

You are human (as is everyone else), forgive, learn, let go of the inappropriate emotion and move on.

Do you have guilt in your life that holds you back or impacts those around you? Do you hang onto guilt as a punishment to yourself or others? Do you want to remove it and start living the life you want to live now?

Why not try out Time Line Therapy sessions. We have a special offer for three sessions £80 (normally £120). For more information contact me at jo@yourwellbeinguk.com

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