

Letting Go Of GUILT



In many circumstances, guilt is an appropriate internal safeguard that helps to keep us from doing things that are harmful to ourselves or others. But when persistent feelings of guilt begin robbing us of happiness, it's a signal that we need to make a change.

Why Do We Hold On?

Most of us know on some level that guilt is an unproductive emotion. Left unchecked, guilt can lead to feelings of self-loathing, depression, and self-destructive behavior. It solves nothing, it rectifies nothing, and it helps no one.

Guilt is not the same as shame. Guilt is a deep feeling of having done wrong or committed an offence. It is a condemnation of one's behavior and a form of self-punishment for having done wrong.

Shame on the other hand is condemnation of the self. Guilt is designed to correct and steer one's behavior back toward what is right. Shame labels one as unworthy or worthless. For this reason, shame is often used by cultures or groups that do not tolerate deviation as a way to control the behavior of its members.

So what are we trying to accomplish by hanging on to such a negative emotion?

Guilt is much more than a form of self-punishment. It's also a misguided attempt at personal redemption. That's what makes it so strangely addictive. Ongoing and unresolved guilt is a gesture designed to reassure ourselves that whoever or whatever is keeping score knows that we feel remorse.

Because feeling guilty is an entirely negative event, letting go is always advisable, but the best approach depends on what caused guilt to begin with.

The Most Important Question

Before you can let go of your guilt, the most important question to ask yourself is whether you ever should have felt guilty in the first place. Misplaced guilt can come from a variety of sources:

Feelings of responsibility: All of us have genuine responsibilities that we can and should feel obligated to live up to, but overextending your boundaries can lead to unwarranted guilt. Recognize that responsibilities extend only as far as your own actions. You can give love, guidance, and support, but outcomes are not your responsibility.

Failed personal expectations: Are you a perfectionist? Do less than optimal results make you feel as though you've let yourself and others down? If so, you're likely to have unrealistic expectations for yourself. Allow your best effort to be "good enough." Less than perfect results are both natural and human.

Manipulation by others: Everyone has heard the expression "guilt trip," and everyone knows somebody who's great at initiating one. If someone you love frequently causes you to feel guilty, it's time to reevaluate your obligations toward that person.

Need for approval: Love and acceptance shouldn't hinge upon meeting the expectations of others. Your self-worth is entirely independent of someone else's approval. Set your own standards and live up to them. Nothing else is required.

Mixed feelings: A traumatic event that induces grief and sadness, such as the death of a loved one after a long illness, can also bring about deeply felt guilt when other "inappropriate" emotions such as relief are mixed in with them. There is no right way to mourn a loss. Positive emotions during bad times are OK, and they don't diminish your grief or your love for others.

True Redemption

What if your guilt is justified? Apologize and ask what you can do to fix the situation. Then follow through. If the person you've harmed has passed on, you may find that apologizing to a close relative accomplishes the same thing. Sincere expression of remorse and ownership of our mistakes are what allow us to let go and move on.

Deep down, we all know the difference between right and wrong. The guilt we feel when we harm others can only be eliminated by rationalization or making amends. Those who rationalize away their wrongs pave the path to spiritual and moral decay. Those who strive to make things right, grow their relationships and their spirituality, along with their love for themselves and others.

