

Guilt: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Never mind the Zodiac. The sign many of us find ourselves under at one time or another is “Guilt.”

At it’s best, guilt is a sign that you’ve done or are about to do something that clashes with your personal values. At its worst, it’s a sign that you’ve lost sight of the bigger picture and you need to take steps to restore your sense of balance.

As a warning bell, guilt can be very useful. With its direct pipeline to your conscience, it helps you stay the course when times are tough.

But a very small amount of guilt can go a long way. Unfortunately, too many people overdose, causing harm to themselves, to the people they love and to others. After all, who can see straight during an overdose?

Just how does guilt obtain this power over us, and what can we do about it?

- Unreasonable expectations of ourselves and a tangled view of reality tend to feed guilt. For example, in a burst of loyalty, you may promise your parents to personally do whatever it takes to maintain their lifestyle in their old age, a promise that can take a crippling toll when life – in the form of declining health, distance, jobs, stress on the family – intervenes. Guilt loves these kinds of situations.
- Guilt steals power by limiting how far you can see. *Don’t look at the bigger picture*, it whispers. *Thing small and narrow...keep your head down and your eyes on me*. Nice try, guilt. One sure-fire way to win that power back – and do what’s right by the people you care about – is to prevent the self-centred sentimentality of guilt from distracting you from seeing all sides of a situation clearly. Yes, it’s true; it *is* easier to give into guilt than to fend it off.)
- Guilt can be a very dishonest emotion – a first cousin of martyrdom. People who secretly feel they don’t measure up sometimes wear guilt on their sleeve to notify the world what good, caring people they are. That’s when it’s time to rethink just what is a good, caring person, anyway. Surely it’s someone who struggles to accept change and new realities, and marches forward bravely.

How can we keep guilt in its place?

- Accept a small amount of guilt in your life, knowing that no matter how “perfectly” you behave, very few of us can – or would want to – avoid it completely.
- Ask a friend or counselor to help you balance your view of a situation, or to reassure you about your judgments. Sometimes situations drag us down so far, so deep, that we need help climbing out to find sunlight...and reason.
- The minute you notice guilt doing a number on your well-being, imagine yourself tipping sideways, leaning like a sinking ship. Then take steps to stand and see straight again. Think things through. Ask yourself, what are the true facts here? – then ask an objective friend to help you fill in the gaps. You owe yourself and others the ability to stand tall and see far.
- Recognize that other people may be in the flames of your guilt simply because they’re not dealing well with their own unresolved – and perhaps misplaced—feelings of anger, frustration or sadness as a result of loss or illness. Understanding where others are coming from is all part of seeing the bigger picture.

When guilt gains the upper hand, share your feelings with your director of care. We may be able to help.