

Living Guilt-Free

How can I shake my guilty feelings?

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The Challenge

Guilt can be like a cancer. It can be progressive and lead to serious physical consequences when left unattended. Most of all it is a crippling emotion to have to live with daily since it can be particularly horrible if it is ever present, intense, and growing.

But not all guilt is bad for us. For instance, a transient feeling of some guilt is just the embarrassment that we feel for an innocent mistake where no harm is done.

Most people describe guilt as something that they should or could have done, but didn't. However, guilt really has more to do with our imagined feelings of *culpability* rather than how we actually or precisely messed-up.

There are basically two types of guilt. *Bona fide* guilt is where you have good reason to feel bad because either you delayed action which could have avoided real harm, or planned action to cause harm in some way. Most of us possess a type of *common guilt* where we simply walk around feeling bad because of all the pressures and "ought to's" that we put on ourselves.

This common type of guilt focuses on things that we didn't do or forgot to do, or how we could have prevented something from happening, or how we deeply regretted our decisions/actions.

At other times, we may feel guilty about the decisions and actions of family members, friends, or some other group to which we belong, but attribute or take on the guilt ourselves.

The Solution

Unfortunately, long standing guilt is not only bad for your psyche; it can make you physically sick. There are ways, however, to release and shed that kind of guilt:

How to figure out why you feel guilty and what to do about it:

1. *Track and grade your guilt:* This can really help, even if it sounds silly. Make a list of all the “things” you feel guilty about. QUICKLY make two ratings for each item out of a 10 maximum scale: How bad (objectively) the thing is that you've done (real vs perceived harm; bona fide vs common guilt), and how guilty you feel about it. After this take some time to think about and clearly explain the ratings to yourself. Be honest! Repeat weekly or monthly.
2. *Consider your next move:* If the common guilt you feel is over something like being nasty to someone or neglecting a job or pet, feel reassured that you *can* do something about this. Taking your list from #1 above, for each item, write down your *Action Plan*, i.e. what you are actually going to do to “fix” the problem. Be specific by considering when and where and how you will take action. Perhaps its prayer, writing a letter, having a talk, making a charitable donation, or committing to a personal change. Often it's merely having the courage to say, "I'm sorry."
3. *Do it!:* And then *take the action as planned* and record your results, feelings and new ideas.
4. *Don't try to escape from bona fide guilt:* Once you get a better idea of why you feel bona fide guilt try to stick with for a short while (like a grieving period). If needed, you can seek help from friends you trust, or even professionals who can help you shed some light on your situation. Chances are, unless you have committed a serious crime, you may have nothing to feel guilty about after a short while.
5. *Practice self-correction:* If you made the wrong choice, failed to do something or unintentionally made something bad happen, try to set it right. (That's your Action Plan, right?) It may mean taking time out of your busy schedule to correct the mistake or remind you of how to stop repeating the mistake. Most importantly it is usually easy to correct our guilty feelings. You can do it ... just don't do the same mistake again!
6. *Focus on your own problems:* It is important to remember that the actions of others are (almost**) *never* your fault. Even though you can influence someone's way of thinking, *you* don't makes *their* decisions or take *their* actions. You are however, responsible for your *own* actions. The most important thing about common guilt is that forgiveness can be earned, trust renewed and wounds healed. The good news is that mistakes are there to be learned from. **Barring extreme anti-social actions like torture, for example.