

good-bye, guilt!

Everyone feels guilty from time to time, but being consumed with compunction can suck the joy out of life.

Six simple strategies for relieving the pressure.

YOU'RE GIVING A PARTY and, in the end, you can't accommodate everyone, so you decide not to invite a friend who didn't seem essential to this particular mix of guests. But she finds out and is hurt. That familiar gray cloud gathers overhead: guilt.

You meant no harm, so why do you feel guilty? Because you believe excluding anyone is wrong, because your friend is upset, or both? The sources of guilt can be complex (particularly for women, who feel it more than men), but one thing's for sure: The less guilt you feel, the better.

Managing this perfectly natural emotion involves making sure that the standards you set for yourself are reasonable and that you aren't endlessly torturing yourself over small issues. Once you know what your guilt is about and where it comes from, you can send it packing—and get on with that party. Here's how.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS NILSSON

“The room—it smells like guilt and Chanel No. 5.”

Lauren Graham as Lorelei on
The Gilmore Girls

are you too guilty?

When you torment yourself over every little transgression, guilt can become toxic, even paralyzing. It can also jeopardize your health, contributing to depression, social anxiety, and eating disorders. “There’s a difference between a sensitivity to other people’s feelings and toxic guilt,” says psychiatrist Edward Hallowell. To help assess how guilt may be affecting you, see how many of the following statements ring true for you.

1. You can’t seem to stop saying that you’re sorry.
2. Other people keep telling you that you’re too hard on yourself, that you expect too much from yourself.
3. Your mantras have become “I should have,” “I wish I had,” “I must.”
4. You can’t remember the last time you did something just for you: a movie, a manicure, a nap.
5. You can’t say no, even if meeting someone else’s needs means giving up the movie and the manicure.

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what, exactly, is guilt?

Guilt is a feeling of remorse that arises when you have done something wrong or think you have. As a rule, “people feel guilty when they feel they’ve failed or transgressed in some way,” says June Tangney, a professor of psychology at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia. Guilt pops up when a spouse says something he realizes is hurtful, when a parent loses her temper with a child, or when a guest breaks the host’s heirloom vase. “It typically arises when you cause someone else pain,” Tangney says.

That is why guilt is not all bad, says Mark R. Leary, Ph.D., director of social psychology at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina: “Emotions like guilt are essential to social relationships.” They motivate you to take other people’s feelings into account. In most cases, you simply register the feeling of guilt and that leads to some sort of attempt to make amends—to apologize, to behave with more care—which can help preserve important relationships.

when guilt becomes a problem

There are times when guilt ceases to serve any purpose other than to make you unhappy. Some people even slide into exhausting self-flagellation. When you obsess about something you’ve done without any purpose or clear goal, “that’s when you need a reality check,” says Leary. (To find out if you’re going overboard, see sidebar, Are You Too Guilty? left.)

But even a moderate amount of guilt can weigh on women, who tend to feel it more than men. The general view is that women are more focused on the caring role, and caring is the bedrock of guilt. What’s more, in a busy world, says Tangney, women often feel that they must choose between shortchanging family and friends (guilt!), cutting corners at work (more guilt!), and ignoring their own needs (yet another type of guilt!). “For many women, the standards are impossibly high, and the world—and their inner voices—are telling them that nothing they do is good enough,” Tangney says. It’s all too easy to feel as though you’re always falling short.



how to handle your guilt

1. Talk it out.

That unfortunate joke you told at the party sounds horrible when you play it over and over in your head. But if you tell a friend, it may not seem so bad. “Secrecy is the intensifier of guilt,” says Edward Hallowell, M.D., the author of *Dare to Forgive: The Power of Letting Go & Moving On* (HCI, \$13), because keeping it to yourself doesn’t allow for fresh perspective. “Once you’ve bared something that you find troubling and discover that your friend isn’t nearly as shocked as you thought she would be, the guilt begins to drain away and you feel better.” And even if your friend is somewhat shocked, just airing the topic can keep you committed to being more sensitive in the future. By discussing the issue openly, “you accept the fact that you’re not perfect, that you’ve done things that aren’t pretty,” says Hallowell. But that doesn’t mean you should punish yourself forevermore.

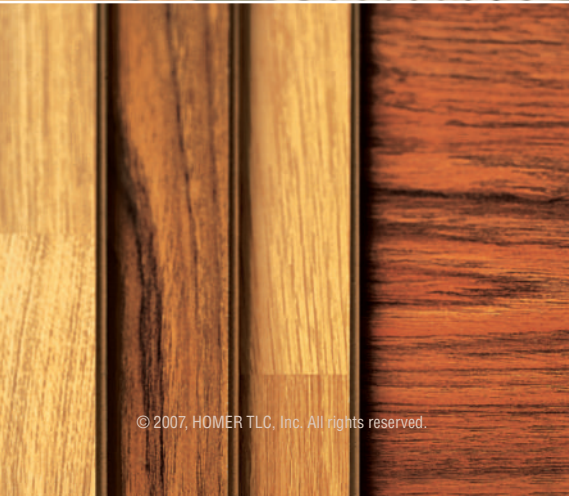
2. Try to make amends.

If you’ve done something that you truly regret, say you’re sorry and try to remedy the situation. Most people appreciate the conciliatory gesture because



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it's a signal that you care about their feelings and value the relationship. And you may find that they weren't all that upset. "Very often the things you are feeling guilty about didn't have any impact on the other person," says Hollowell, "and you're suffering for no reason."

3. Try a reality check.

Guilt often arises automatically, based on standards internalized during childhood. So before you reflexively accept guilt, take a minute to stop and ask, "Am I consciously living by *my own* expectations?" says Leary. Perhaps your mother washed and waxed the floor twice a week. But you may not feel that's the best use of your time and energy, so you choose not to. Still, you feel guilty about not waxing. Those are your mother's priorities, not yours. And keep in mind that you may be the only one who is invested in the thing you feel so guilty about. "Worrying about your failings as a mother because you didn't bake homemade cupcakes when the child doesn't even care is guilt gone wrong," says Margaret Clark, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Yale University.

4. Give yourself credit.

Remind yourself that what you did imperfectly is just part of being human, says Leary. Tell yourself, *Everybody is late from time to time. Or Everybody says something stupid on occasion.* That the behavior isn't unique to you doesn't make it OK, but it's reason enough to stop beating yourself up about it.

Try keeping a journal of all the good things that you've done. "Typically, people who are susceptible to guilt have a hard time giving themselves credit for anything," says Hollowell. So whenever you're feeling overwhelmed by guilt, stop and list five things you've done that are praiseworthy, whether they are small or large.

5. Break a sweat.

Instead of sitting around in a funk, go for a run, a bicycle ride, or a swim or play a few sets of tennis. "Working out is like hitting the reset button on your brain," says Hollowell. "It's hard to exercise and feel guilty at the same time." Granted, this is not a permanent fix for an overwhelming feeling that you aren't

are you too guilty?

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- 6. You avoid people or situations because you think you don't belong or you're not good enough.
- 7. You feel resentful when you do something for someone else.
- 8. Everything is your fault.
- 9. Everything is your fault because you're stupid, bad, or unworthy.
- 10. You can't accept anything short of perfection from yourself.

Results: If more than five of the 10 statements describe how you often feel, it may be time to take steps to get your guilt under control. "Talk to friends or family about how you feel," says Hollowell, and try the other techniques in this article. If you still can't rein in your guilt, consider talking to a therapist for more help, says Hollowell.





pulling your weight at work or you're neglecting a friend, but it's a perfect antidote for smaller, isolated issues that may keep you awake for a night or two.

6. Beware of guilt trips.

Guilt isn't always something that you load on yourself. Some people (whether they intend to or not) induce guilt in others—often to advance their own agendas.

To avoid falling prey to this, assess whether the other person's point of view is legitimate and if he or she is taking your needs into account. For example, perhaps your elderly mother doesn't get out much and loves your visits. But your daily presence will not literally cure what ails her, as she none-too-subtly suggests. If making the long trip to see her every day means you have to neglect your own family and yourself, this is a setup for more guilt. In this case, your mother's need is legitimate but her representation of it is exaggerated.

Talk to the other person about solutions that work for both of you so no one feels resentment toward the other. And if all else fails, bringing her a batch of cookies (store-bought) always makes things better.

guilty as charged

When it comes to guilt infliction, writer Judith Newman is always the nail, never the hammer.

I just can't make anyone feel guilty. It's a skill I completely lack, like painting or the ability to behave sanely in front of an attractive man.

You would think I'd be a master of the art. My mother liked to show me her Cesarean scar and tell me how awful my birth was. ("But you're usually such a good daughter, it was worth it.") Until I was in my 20s, my father called me every day to tell me what kind of sandwich he had brought to work, brown bagging rather than buying lunch. "I've got to save everything I can for you," he'd say. "Journalists don't make much of a living." So familiar am I with guilt, I've become a connoisseur of the subtly different forms of guilt: Catholic ("God knows what you're up to!"), Jewish ("You know what you're up to! You—and your mother, too"), and a half-dozen other varieties.

And yet I am the Queen of Letting 'Em Off the Hook. Recently a man who had broken my heart years ago e-mailed me. His wife had left him. He was alone. And still drinking. And strapped for cash. I owed him nothing, and here I was, feeling for him.

Sure, he had left me bereft. But now I had a job I loved, a husband, two kids, a dog. He had no one. His dog had recently died. Had he mentioned that? And, yes, he was broke. I just felt...guilty. How much bad luck could one guy have? I agonized about it for a while, but I wrote him a check. I suppose I'd rather be a jackass than coldhearted.

Why I am always the guilted and never the guilt giver, I cannot say for sure. Pride probably. I want the world's bounty, but I want it given to me because I am so beloved, not because anyone feels he owes me. This is neither rational nor profitable, but there it is.

Making people feel guilty is a good skill to have, though, so I have tried to glean secrets from the master: my husband, John. He denies he's an expert. "I don't make anyone feel guilty. I just make people who are too full of themselves see their own faults. If they feel guilty, they have something to feel guilty about," he says, pointedly eyeing me. He's wrong, of course. Or is he?

Regardless, whether guilt-tripping is passed on via nature or nurture, my five-year-old son comes by it honestly. Recently, at the end of an exhausting day, Henry wanted me to run up two flights of stairs to fetch him a glass of juice. I told him to get it himself.

"That's OK, Mom. I know you're tired," he said. "When I have a lot of money, I'll buy you a great big wheelchair and I'll push you everywhere and you'll never have to walk anywhere again."

I took those stairs two at a time.

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