

THE GUILT TRAP BY CAROL ABAYA, M.A.

Sandwich Generationers often - and needlessly - "talk" themselves into "guilt trips" and traps. It's easy!

I must be perfect; please others; always be right; be in control; help others. I can't stand it when people are angry with me.

Gary D. McKay, Ph.D. and Don Dinkmeyer, Ph.D. in their book "How You Feel Is Up To You" explains.

"You can determine how you talk yourself into guilt feelings by examining your thoughts. Guilt-producing thoughts often result in statements about your personal worth and are fraught with absolute terms such as should, must always, never, can't, awful. When you attack your character instead of simply judging your actions, you feel guilty. If, however, you concentrate on the action you don't like and refuse to evaluate your worth based on mistakes, you'll feel remorse, but not guilt. To "get rid of the guilts" you need to choose new self-talk. You need to get rid of absolutes and statement of self-condemnation".

Nancy L. Mace, M.A. and Peter V. Rabins, M.D. in their book "The 36-Hour Day" look at guilt in a slightly different way.

"It is quite common for family members to feel guilty: for the way they behaved toward the person in the past, for being embarrassed by the person's odd behavior, for losing their temper with the person, for wishing they did not have the responsibility of care, for considering placing the person in a nursing home, or for many other reasons, some trivial, some critical".

Sandwich Generations often feel guilty if a parent becomes too demanding or needy or if they want to take time off for self. In the first instance the thought is "I should be able to do everything myself." In the second, I should put aside my own agenda."

Acknowledge Feelings

Mace says, "The first step is to admit that feelings of guilt are a problem... When the feelings of guilt in a relationship are not acknowledged, they can destructively affect how you act... They become a problem when they affect your decisions. If you are being influenced by guilt feelings, you must make a decision. Are you going to go around in a circle with one foot caught in the trap of guilt, or are you going to say "What is done is done" and go on from there? There is no way to remedy the fact that you never liked your mother or that you slapped a sick person, for example. However, guilt feelings tend to keep us looking for ways to remedy the past instead of letting us accept it. Make decisions and plans on what is best now."

Values

Rose Marie Turek, L.C.S.W. a family counselor, advises “Change the things that can be changed and accept the others. Accept the fact that the elder is not going to change, or “get better”. Accept that you cannot make the elder better, because it may be that no one can.”

Turek notes that unhealthy guilt comes from trying to live up to or by someone else’s standards. “These standards or values may not be true for us. So we may feel wrong, unworthy. We feel angry or frustrated because we can’t live up to someone else’s values. These negative feelings use negative energy and end up as guilt.

“Negativity within one’s self, if buried, unexpressed and not dealt with, festers and becomes a major problem.”

McKay adds “Guilt can serve useful purposes. Guilt can be a sign that you need to make some changes, if you interpret it as such and make some positive decisions. The problem is, most people stop with the guilt feelings. Guilt doesn’t spur them to make permanent changes in behavior.”

Change Mind Set

McKay suggests taking several simple steps for getting rid of “guilt.”

- Examine the purpose of your guilt. Are you punishing yourself? Are you using guilt to excuse yourself from acting appropriately? Are you trying to protect yourself from you feelings of anger?
- Analyze your own beliefs and thoughts. How do your beliefs lead to guilt?
- Choose new thoughts and use different words that can help you problemsolve.

Decide what you want to do. Continue to feel guilty? Or make a commitment to new future behavior?

Don’t Forget “I” Self

Elwood N. Chapman in his book “The Unfinished Business of Living: Helping Aging Parents Help Themselves”, says, “View yourself as an assistant to the elderly individual. This may help you remember that the more you help them help themselves, the better it will be for them and the less pressure on you.

“Immunize your emotions. Some domineering and highly critical parents are more demanding with their words than their hearts. Most do not expect things to change in their favor -- they just need to complain because the world did not live up to their expectations. Seek the underlying message and let unfounded complaints roll off your shoulder.

“Embrace the tough love approach. “Tough love” is a genuine form of love. It means you can get tough (stand up for yourself) yet continue to love the other party as before.

“Protect your other relationships. Sometimes an adult child will become so intimidated and engrossed in a parent relationship that he or she will make the mistake of ignoring other relationships which may be more important.

Turek has a six ingredient recipe for getting rid of guilt.

- Stop pretending to yourself and everyone else that you don't feel or that your feelings do not matter.
- Remember to always be honest with your own needs.
- You are not obligated to meet the needs of others. That is their own obligation.
- Only you can know what is best for you. You do not need to meet anyone else's standards or expectations.
- You owe yourself loyalty to yourself.
- Believe in yourself and your feelings and accept yourself just as you are -you are quite okay just the way you are.

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