

How to forgive yourself, and stop feeling guilty

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Guilt is perhaps one of the most debilitating emotions, and one that has the potential to negatively influence the human mind. Such feelings can build to the point where they become unmanageable, creating a fragmented mental outlook that prevents us from achieving goals, pursuing dreams and becoming the masters of our own destiny.

Guilt is also one of the most misunderstood emotions, as numerous scientific studies can testify to. In order to explore the nature of guilt and dispel many of the misconceptions surrounding it, psychologists Claire Adams and Mark Leary devised an experiment which focused on women who were striving to lose weight. The pair split the subjects into two groups and encouraged them to eat doughnuts and candy, with the simple goal of determining whether people would indulge less if they were relieved of their guilt.

This premise seems both cruel and ridiculous in equal measure, but while one group was made to feel better about skipping on their diets, the other was made to experience feelings of guilt. While logic would suggest that the former would eat more, they were actually found to have consumed just 28 grams as opposed to the 70 grams eaten by the group that were left to feel guilty. So what does this tell us about guilt, and what steps can we take to stop feeling guilty as individuals?

5 Ways to Stop Feeling Guilty:

1. Remember that the brain exists as a separate entity to the mind

These findings can be explained by the fact that the brain exists as a separate entity to the mind, meaning that we cannot fully control our emotional responses to specific events. In this instance, it is important to understand that all emotional triggers are processed in an area of the brain known commonly as the limbic system, which is driven by short-term cravings and wants to indulge specific impulses. So when we feel guilty, we are empowering this part of the brain and allowing ourselves to indulge more than we otherwise would.

It is therefore crucial that we remember this, while taking steps to manage our response to emotional triggers and rather than giving in to sudden impulses and feelings. One of the best options is to engage in a process called mind-mapping, which involves the visual representation of your thought processes at any given time. This has emerged as a popular business tool, but it also has the dual benefit of mapping your personal thoughts into a structured form and helping you to plot specific responses to debilitating, emotional triggers.

2. Learn to consult yourself like your best friend

If you are struggling to accomplish a specific goal (think of weight loss, for example), it is easy to become consumed with guilt, remorse and the emotional response to failure. You can strive to avoid this by

introducing objectivity to the situation, and imagining that it is as a close friend or beloved family member who is struggling to remain focused on what they are aiming to achieve.

This instantly changes your perspective, as rather than focus on the emotion you are instead required to offer actionable advice and viable solutions. So rather than berating them and forcing them to feel guilty for their perceived failings, you would instead focus on rationalizing the situation and empowering them to rebound from short-term setbacks. By visualizing such a scenario and challenging your perspective, you can become your own counsellor and negate the emotional impact of guilt.

3. Learn from your mistakes and embrace the lessons of failure

When we are children, we are much more tenacious and fearless when learning new things. When learning how to walk and developing our academic skills, our burgeoning minds are incapable of guilt and therefore purely focused on the attainment of a single goal. As a result of this, we simply consider failure as an inevitable part of the learning process as children and build on our mistakes with the encouragement of others.

As we grow older and lose our inhibitions, however, we begin to fear failure and become consumed with guilt when we do not accomplish important goals. We subsequently allow the negative emotions that are associated with failure to prevent us from trying further, which in turns creates a vicious cycle of guilt, depression and anxiety. If we can instead focus on the core lessons of each specific failure and use these to inspire future efforts, we will gradually become more successful and eliminate guilt as an influential emotion.

4. Learn to say no instead of acting out of obligation

Let's face facts; there will also be little chores and activities in life that we do in spite of ourselves. From visiting the in-laws to food shopping, these mundane tasks are completed not out of love but because they are a fundamental part of everyday life and crucial to our interactions with others.

It is important to draw the line between necessary (but functional) tasks and voluntary activities that we have no obligation to participate in, however, as otherwise we can be made to spend the vast majority of our time either feeling guilty or acting out of obligation. If you can learn to make this distinction and simply say no to invitations that do not appeal to you, you live a more enriched life without becoming burdened by excess guilt.

Working on your delivery helps this process, as it prevents you from feeling as though you have been unnecessary rude or harsh.

5. Learn to forgive yourself by righting specific wrongs

If you are to stop feeling guilty and manage your emotional response to failure or adversity, you must ultimately learn to forgive yourself. While this may be easier in instances where we have only let ourselves down, we must strive to forgive the mistakes that have impacted negatively on those who we

hold dear. This can be an extremely difficult challenge, but you must ultimately ask yourself who benefits from your underlying feelings of sadness, guilt and helplessness?

The answer is nobody, as this simply creates a scenario where you are incapable of atoning for your mistakes and righting the wrongs that have hurt those around you. Such atonement is the only thing that can help you to move on as an individual, while this can only be achieved if you forgive your own mistakes and believe in your ability to make amends. Interestingly, the part of our brain that drives willpower becomes stronger when we have the belief and desire to accomplish something, and forgiving ourselves is the first step towards fostering this mind-set.