

Mental Health

Do You Feel Guilty All the Time?

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HBR Staff/Getty Images

Summary. Guilt is a pervasive but unconstructive emotion that many of us experience. If not managed, it can cause us to waste valuable energy. Counteract it with this morse code: SOS. Self: Take care of yourself before assisting others. You cannot be anything to anyone... [more](#)

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We feel guilty we didn't work on this article earlier, and now, having done the research and knowing what we know about guilt and how unconstructive it is, we feel doubly guilty about feeling guilty in the first place (an emotion we refer to as "meta-guilt").

We're sorry we wasted your time with that last sentence. We know you're a busy person that has little interest in self-pity. But we must admit, now that we have apologized, we also feel a little bit guilty about saying sorry. All the research says that [good leaders](#), for example, should be strong, brave, and confident in their choices — not self-critical and apologetic.

Can you imagine if we lived our lives like that? Or ... maybe you don't have to.

Guilt, as subtle as it may be, is a pervasive emotion that many of us experience daily. Some argue that perfectionism is at the heart of it, but even those of us that are far from perfectionist aren't immune to guilt. Others argue that guilt is a complete waste of time, but we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Guilt can be a sign of a functional moral compass. For example, if, in a fit of rage, you call your colleague a useless [snollygoster](#) and put salt in his extra large, nonfat, double decaf mochaccino, feeling guilty is probably quite an appropriate emotion, and hopefully, it will prevent you from similar shenanigans in the future.

In the case above, the "crime" is obvious and undeniable, though generally, guilt is much more insidious. When we're at work, we feel guilty for not being with our children (or even our pets). When we're at home, we feel guilty for not having done the laundry for a week or for not being at work. On the weekends, we feel guilty about not calling our friends or hanging out with our friends instead of our mothers. During the Covid-19 lockdown, we felt guilty about not learning three new languages, and instead spending time on the couch bingeing our favorite TV series, which were really not even enjoyable thanks to the nagging voices in our heads reminding us that we should be learning Mandarin.

The point is we feel [pressure](#) to be doing something, always, especially things that show we're progressing. When we're not, we feel guilty. We're constantly comparing ourselves to others' success stories. We believe that our successes and our failures are completely due to our [own actions](#), or lack thereof. Hence the reason we are not successful must be that we are not working hard enough (or *still* on our sofa with our favorite series).

The pressure to excel at work is ON, but we also expect more and more of ourselves on other fronts: our social life ([#omgfriendshipgoals](#)), our family life, our health, our looks, everything.

Guilt doesn't necessarily stop you from doing things, but it can waste valuable energy. It can slowly chip away at our [self-esteem](#), making it more difficult to pursue goals or to move on after setbacks. If left unchecked, it may even result in a range of [physical manifestations](#) including anxiety and insomnia. The guilt we feel about not being a perfect employee or a perfect friend or a perfect anything is partially imposed by society, but the other part is also very clearly self-imposed. Since it seems that for the most part, you are your own judge, you can also set yourself free. I declare the defendant not guilty your honor!

As four strong women with interesting career trajectories (including CEO and senior banker), we were plagued by guilt for many years, and perfectly aware that it was draining our energy. It is always easier to identify a problem than to solve one. What helped for us was coming-up with our own morse code for distress (or in this case, just stress): SOS.

Our code has helped us structure the ways in which we can solve a problem on three different levels: what can I (*self*) do, what can *others* do, and what can *society* do. We suggest you start using it, too.

Self

Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others: Guilt is often caused by a feeling of [underperforming](#). When you are stressed, you are more likely to fall prey to such [self-sabotaging thoughts](#). The first step to defeating guilt may be to take better care of yourself. You cannot be anything to anyone (whether boss, friend, spouse, parent, etc.) if you are a nervous wreck. Get some sleep. Don't stay up late because midnight to 2 am is the only time when everyone who wants something from you is asleep and you can finally have a moment to yourself. Create those moments during the day, no matter how short.

If you block them in your agenda and create a habit, within no time it will be second nature. Plenty of [research](#) (and let's face it, common sense) shows that people who are happier, are more [productive](#), better partners, have better marriages and are hopefully therefore less likely to beat themselves up with guilt.

Prioritize: All of your conflicting priorities are, of course, at the heart of guilt. When you've decided on a path forward, don't second guess your choice. Respect the person who took that decision (i.e., your past self). When you decide, mentally stand by what you have chosen. At work, for example, make a list of your current tasks, and map them on a grid of importance (x-axis) and urgency (y-axis). If you are able to (and technology helps a lot with this), estimate how much time you spend on each of your tasks. If you find that there are tasks that are neither important nor urgent but that are very time consuming, see whether you can delegate them, do them more efficiently, or simply stop doing them.

Ask for help. We're often reluctant to ask for [help](#) because we feel it might undermine our authority, diminish our status, or simply because we're afraid of the rejection. [Research](#) shows that asking people to do things for you *actually makes them like you more*. (Sounds like a win-win situation to us!) Having less on your plate will help you meet your commitments and take care of your priorities, and leave you with fewer nagging, guilt-inducing voices.

Others

Don't be judgmental: Your perfectionism may be affecting other people, too. Piling on the pressure to perform may make your teammates feel guilty about not being able to measure up to your standards. If you are frustrated by someone else's performance at work, remind yourself that you don't know what's going on in their private life at the moment. As an added benefit, being less judgmental towards others for their perceived "inadequacies" may help them be milder towards themselves and therefore feel less guilty.

System

Redesign what we teach and learn: Our educational, cultural, and family (eco)systems should stop teaching "boys to be brave and girls to be [eco](#)." Everyone should be taught from a young age how to chill out and (shock, horror!) do nothing every once in a while, and enjoy a moment of stillness, guilt free. So, if you haven't learned how to bake bread during the pandemic, it's okay. If you didn't respond to every single message in your inbox today, there is a tomorrow. If you forgot to order the groceries last week, order in! Stop feeling guilty about not using every minute of every day to do something productive. It's not possible, and it's not healthy.

Decreasing feelings of guilt can be learned (although it may take a while) and built into our daily lives. The earlier we start, the more chance we have for future generations to be more balanced than we are.



Marijn Wiersma is a corporate anthropologist and inspires people with her vision for a better world. She is the co-author of the book "Banking for a Better World," and is a speaker on financial inclusion. As a visionary, multi-linguist, and free thinker, she is creative, curious, and innovative. She's lived on three continents, worked in over 35 countries, and is a mother of four.



Chantal Korteweg trained as a lawyer at Leiden Law School, and feels strongly about social justice. She currently works as a senior strategy consultant at ABN AMRO and she initiated the Fempower Your Growth partnership, a Dutch Financial Sector initiative, creating access to finance for female entrepreneurs. She is the mother of two children.



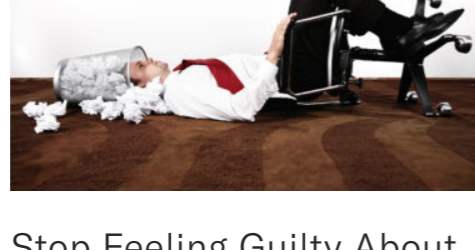
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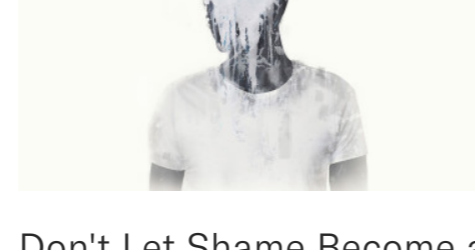
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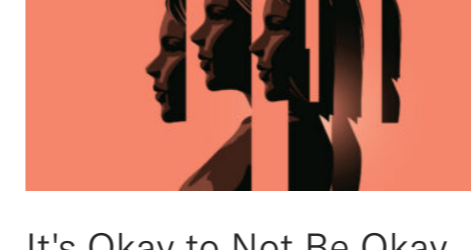
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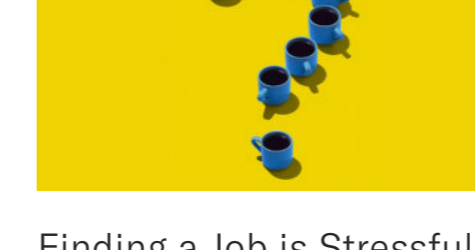
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