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GUILTY




The verdict is in: *Guilt* is like **ACID RAIN** that eats away at our emotional health. Here's how to get to a sunnier state of mind.

by STACEY STEIN



UNRESOLVED GUILT OR EXCESSIVE GUILT INTERFERES
*with cognitive functioning, concentration
and daily tasks.*



BY ALL ACCOUNTS, 41-YEAR-OLD ROBIN SINGER, is the archetypal supermom. On a typical day, she does school drop-off and pickup for her three kids, shuttles them to lessons and play dates, makes meals for the family and even finds time to bake.

The married mom from Toronto also runs her own successful copywriting business, working for several high-profile clients. Yet, sometimes she's still plagued by a persistent feeling of guilt that she isn't doing enough – at work or at home.

"I feel guilty almost every single day," says Singer. And although she feels gratified with her work-life balance, her kids can be the greatest source of her guilty feelings. "It's my own self-imposed guilt that I should spend more time reading with them and playing with them, and that I should feed them healthier foods," she says. Some of us feel guilty about other things in our lives, too. From not working out enough to not doing more for our parents to work-related pressures, the list can be exhaustive – and that's just scratching the surface.

Singer is in good company. Studies show we experience guilt in many small moments during the day. And according to Dr. Guy Winch, a New York-based psychologist and author of *Emotional First Aid: Healing Rejection, Guilt, Failure, and other Everyday Hurts*, those many moments can literally add up to hours a week for many of us.

But guilt isn't just the domain of women. Men can also be riddled with these same feelings. Anyone with a predisposition to feel badly about personal wrongdoings or who anticipates feeling badly before an action is even committed is likely to have guilt issues. And it's not good for any of us.

In large doses, consistent guilt is like an "alarm that doesn't shut off" and can be incredibly distracting and demoralizing, even impacting our health due to the stress it generates. "Unresolved guilt or excessive guilt interferes with cognitive functioning, concentration and daily tasks," says Dr. Winch. "It inhibits us from enjoying life, and in many cases, it can make us resort to self-punishment of sorts."

If any of this is sounding way too familiar, perhaps it's time to take guilt by the horns and wrestle it to the

ground. Here are some of the most common sources of guilt and ways to overcome them.

SOCIAL

THE SCENARIO

Your mom phones and, when you answer, you're greeted with "A whole week passes and I don't hear from you."

THE GUILT

While this may not rattle some people, Mom's guilt trip works like a charm on you. Whether it's feeling guilty for not calling our moms often enough, not spending as much time with our families as we (or they) feel we should or some other way in which we perceive (or others suggest) we've wronged someone we care about, social or interpersonal guilt plagues most of us at one time or another. "I think interpersonal relationships are the most common source of guilt," says Dr. Winch. "If you are guilt-prone, when someone expresses dissatisfaction with you, you're likely to feel guilty whether you did something wrong or not."

THE FIX

Research shows that people who guilt-trip others often aren't aware that what they're doing is harmful. So if your mom makes you feel badly about not calling her enough, bring this to her attention. You can then ask what her expectations are and negotiate accordingly, making sure to point out any chasm between her expectations and yours so that the two of you can bridge it together. If you often find yourself beset by social guilt, Dr. Winch also recommends not taking it at face value. "Ask yourself if the amount of guilt you feel is reasonable or not," he says. If it is, then acknowledge your wrongdoing and take steps to rectify it. If it's not, remind yourself that you probably did nothing *that* wrong. Being more self-aware when these feelings start to creep in can help you keep guilt in check.

On the plus side, in small doses this type of guilt can actually be helpful, according to Dr. Roger Giner-Sorolla, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent

in the United Kingdom. He spearheaded a series of studies from 2009 to 2011 called The Social Guilt Project that investigated the idea that guilt is more helpful when a person is involved in a social (rather than individual) dilemma. "It seems to help people correct their behaviour when another person is involved," he says, adding that if a person feels guilty after wronging someone, this feeling will tend to motivate them to make amends. This can go a long way toward building and maintaining healthy relationships.

INDIVIDUAL

THE SCENARIO

You wake up feeling invigorated, ready to tackle the day. Fast-forward to 10 p.m. and you haven't accomplished even half the things on your to-do list.

THE GUILT

Individual guilt differs from social guilt in that it's triggered when we don't live up to our own expectations. Dr. Heidi Wiedemann, a Montreal-based psychologist who has worked with patients coping with this type of guilt, describes it as an internal struggle between what we presume our values to be and how we fail to live up to them. "You can look at it as what I expect from myself versus what I think others expect from me," she says.

Dr. Wiedemann blames the impact of media and society for individual guilt. Women, in particular, are bombarded by messages telling them they can do it all – raise a family, have a successful career, stay fit and look great – but this isn't always realistic, leading to feelings of guilt when they're unable to pull it all off.

And if you feel guilty in virtually every area of your life, how can you possibly live it to the fullest?

THE FIX

Developing self-acceptance, letting go of judgment and learning how to respond to our inner critic is what we need to work on to overcome individual guilt, according to Dr. Wiedemann. We also need to remind ourselves of our successes. "People don't think anything of speaking to themselves negatively, but when you tell people to start speaking to themselves compassionately, they look at you like you're from another planet. Isn't that a little strange?"

She recommends engaging in a writing exercise to help "change unhealthy cognitions to healthy ones." Grab a piece of paper and jot down your guilt-ridden, defeatist "inner dialogue" in one column, then write your "rational retorts" in the next column. This will help put the negative self-talk in perspective and let you practise being kinder to yourself.

PROFESSIONAL

THE SCENARIO

It's 5 p.m. and you're eager to leave the office. You start

IN LARGE DOSES,
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doesn't shut off



heading for the elevator but notice that your colleagues are still at their computers. Gripped by guilt, you contemplate heading back to your desk.

THE GUILT

The workplace is fertile ground for the guilt-prone. Potential minefields include situations where you might feel as though you're letting down your colleagues, like choosing a family obligation over a work commitment. Dr. Jennifer Newman, a workplace psychologist based in Vancouver, says she's seen a lot of cases where employees feel very guilty about making mistakes at work. "If you are very conscientious and you have perfectionist tendencies, the guilt can be quite paralyzing," says Dr. Newman. If you're checking and re-checking your work or second-guessing your decisions at the office, productivity and creativity will suffer. In the worst-case scenario, you might not be able to meet deadlines or finish your tasks at all.

THE FIX

Unexamined guilt can lead us to make bad decisions, but examined guilt can help us solve problems, says Dr. Newman. For example, instead of giving in to your guilt about not hanging around the office past 5 p.m., she recommends using that time to have a conversation with your boss about what you've been up to and your productivity level while also tackling the issue of face time at the office. She advises being upfront and asking your supervisor if there's a requirement to stay past 5 p.m., even if you've finished your work for the day. You'll either learn that this isn't the expectation, in which case your guilty feelings should be alleviated, or find out that, in fact, the expectation is to stay at the office late and start a new project. You can then adjust your behaviour accordingly. (If you haven't been happy at work, this may be the much-needed signal that this job isn't right for you.)

"When you have the feeling that you're disappointing people or letting them down, you have to do something about it and have a conversation to find out whether this is true," says Dr. Newman. "Guilt is a flag that leads you to the question 'What's really going on here?'" Once you have the conversation with a loved one, your boss or even yourself, you can finally learn to get rid of the guilt. *HR*