

# **LifeSkills: How to deal with guilt**

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Guilt can be good and normal. It often shows a healthy sense of responsibility.

Guilt is not always bad. On one level it shows a healthy sense of responsibility. However, there are some people who feel guilty more often than not. Often these people spend much of their time doing things they don't really want to do, just so as not to feel guilty.

## **Why do we feel guilty?**

At its simplest level we feel guilt when we have done something that violates one of our ethical values. Let us say, for example, that one of your ethical values is to tell the truth. Your boss asks if you have finished a particular task and you tell him yes when in fact it's going to take you another week to get the job done. You feel guilty because you have violated one of your ethical values, namely telling the truth.

## **There are different reasons why we feel guilty.**

From childhood on, we have learned and integrated beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. Our families—parents, grandparents, siblings—along with school, friends, and other life experiences, all contribute to this process. Because of this complex history, we may not be aware exactly how we come to believe a particular act is right or wrong.

## **An exercise to deal with a feeling of guilt**

When you feel guilty, you can clarify the situation and make it more manageable using the following exercise which consists of posing and answering four questions:

1. What makes me feel guilty?

Describe the situation that brought on the guilty feeling, using the phrase "I feel guilty because..."

Situation: My mother is in the hospital and I feel guilty because I didn't visit her every day this week.

2. What value do I feel I have violated? Begin your sentence by "It is important for me to..."

Value: It is important for me to care for and support my mother when she is ill.

3. What am I asking myself to do to fulfill this value? Answer using the phrase "I should..."

Action: I tell myself I should visit my mother every day while she is in the hospital.

4. What is it I really need to do to fulfill this value?

By the time you get to the third question, the unrealistic nature of the demand you are making of yourself becomes clear. Your analysis of the situation could go something like this:

"While my mother's illness causes me concern, I am not her only support in this situation. She is in the hospital and getting good professional care. Other family members and friends can also visit. Seeing her every day will put an unnecessary burden on my private and professional life. I will talk to my mother and arrange to visit her a few times a week and phone her on other days."

This process makes it possible to identify the value that is important to you and what you actually need to do to fulfill it.

In this case, the solution allows you not only to deal with your guilt, but also to show your care and concern. Moreover, your mother will be aware of your love and support.

### **Persist**

Using this exercise should help you deal with guilt in a more positive and constructive way.

If you have tried these suggestions and feel in need of more assistance, you might want to seek professional help.