

# GUILT

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS



Most of us have experienced guilt at some point in our lives. Sometime, somewhere, somehow guilt has become a part of our awareness.

Guilt, in fact, should be called the Number One Disease in America! We feel guilty about everything; we feel guilty when we feel bad, when we are sick or tired or late. We feel guilty because it's only meat loaf. We eat because we are guilty and we starve ourselves for the same reasons.

We give up ice cream because of guilt and pretend to "love" broccoli as much as cheesecake. We clean house, iron permanent-press shirts and call home because of guilt. We balance the checkbook, stop at traffic lights and watch the speedometer either because we already feel guilty or we think we should.

Fault and blame are companions to guilt and seem to be interchangeable. It is always someone's fault. "Someone is to blame for this. . ." is probably one of the first complete sentences uttered by Man (Woman?!) when speech was invented.

We are so good at accepting blame and fault and guilt that we do it without even noticing. We apologize for the traffic jam. We feel badly about not eating enough fiber and we are convinced that if only something else had happened, then this would not have occurred.

**If Only**

"If only . . ."--perhaps the two most difficult words to live with in the human experience. "If only I had known . . .; If only I had listened . . .; If only we had been

there . . . ; If only we'd gone to the doctor sooner. . . ." The "if onlys" echo throughout history--each accompanied by the worst feeling of all: guilt.

Guilt is such an overwhelming emotion. It colors our thinking, our actions, our reactions. We do things because we are already guilty or because we don't want to be guilty. We send cards, make phone calls, put off doing some things and do other things that we really would like to put off--all because of guilt.

The other side of guilt is responsibility. Who is responsible for this? What things do we know we should have changed? What pieces of the puzzle should we have played differently? "If only" and "should" have become the mile markers on this journey. The more we look for them, the more "if onlys" we find.



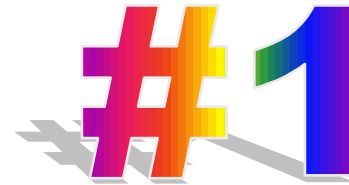
We revisit the events in our lives a thousand times and then, again and again, search for anything we could have done differently--some little twist or turn that would have set the scene differently, or that would have turned the ending ever so slightly. We agonize over the smallest detail that we didn't see or that we forgot to do or that perhaps we ignored. We search the past for keys to the future we grieve for . . . our present and our future are because of our guilt . . . for we believe ourselves to be ultimately responsible for the events that have created our NOW.

Even if we can step outside ourselves for a moment and allow rational thinking to return, the secret, private, inner conversations still search for "if only"--a desperate search for some reason, some explanation of why. Surely someone is to blame for then and now! If no one else is available, we will accept the guilt ourselves and begin to know that our loved one died because of something we did or did not do, think, know or believe.

Guilt becomes one of the most difficult parts of the journey. It lingers perhaps far longer than any other emotion. There is always something we can rethink, replay, relive. In hopes of . . . in hopes of what?

"If only . . ." is a sentence we never finish because we know it isn't possible to recreate the stage, the scene and the play. We can only wish for a different ending. "If only," becomes the title of every thought we have.

If guilt is the number-one disease in America, then surely we must be on the verge of a cure! We can fix just about everything else. They have even discovered fat-free fat (although the fat-free ice cream does not rate the description of decadence!). We must be close to discovering a pill or potion or thought process that will alleviate the pangs of guilt that cling to the arterial walls and "gum up the works" with the heart and soul.



Until the cure is patented, I have a few tricks of my own that have weathered more than a few guilt trips. Whenever I feel overwhelmed with guilt feelings, I write them down. I make flash cards of my guilts.

Each guilt has its own card. I can shuffle these guilt cards to my heart's content, arranging and rearranging them according to my mood. I can list the guilts chronologically, according to the way things really happened (or should have happened). I can arrange them in the order of their importance or in the order of pain still felt.

I can manipulate those guilt cards until I begin to feel a sense of control. I can select one or two to carry with me just in case I forget what I am feeling guilty about; and, once in a great while, I can tear up one and throw it away.

I have also perfected the technique of catastrophizing. When I am really "into being guilty," I have learned to take my guilt to the very farthest limit possible. This

works best on current guilts rather than on past guilts, but let me give you an example.

Several months ago, I visited my sister for a family celebration. It was my job to put the turkey in the oven before joining the family across town. I spent a great deal of time figuring out how to turn on her fancy oven, complete with timers and remote controls.

I then dashed out of the house, hoping not to be late. When we returned much later, we discovered that I had, indeed, set the oven correctly and everything was working properly. I had, however, forgotten to put the turkey in the oven.

Therefore, I ruined what was supposed to be a lovely dinner party. Of course, I had ruined everything by then: my nephew's graduation, my sister's dinner party and reputation as a hostess and the joy of being together as a family. It just got worse and worse until I remembered another guilt from a long time ago. . . . Suddenly, a cold, uncooked turkey seemed a bit silly.

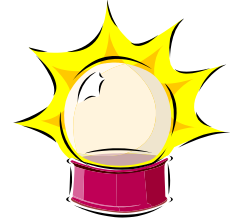
Grieving people seem to develop a new sense of what really matters, and cold turkey can hardly match the emptiness of the chair at the table. Guilt should be saved for the really big stuff! When the really big stuff hits, there is only one thing to do. Pay attention! Don't deny the guilt that sweeps over you. Let it come, acknowledge it, experience it and then let it go. The only "cure" I know for our kind of guilt is to remember this: If you could have, you would have.

Trust yourself! You (and I) did everything possible at the moment. It wasn't enough or right or whatever, but we did what we were able to do, think and believe. If you had known what was going to happen in the future, you would have changed the present so you wouldn't have to live in the past. Trust that. Believe it!

Guilt is a human emotion, and we must learn to forgive ourselves for making mistakes, for not hearing clues that may not have been there, for not seeing what

seems so clear now. We cannot go back and rewrite the script. We just have to learn to live with the guilt of being less than magicians, capable of foretelling the future.

There are no crystal balls or magic wands. Work at learning to forgive yourself for living. Only then can the music begin again. Take care of yourself, eat right (put a few chocolate chips in the oat bran), obey the speed limit, open the curtains and claim today. It is ours. In spite of our inability to manage it well, the day is ours. Use it not to find the one thing you could have changed, but to find the things that you can do now to recapture the love you haven't lost. Our loved ones have surely forgiven us; perhaps we should try that ourselves.



I'm counting on Heaven being guilt-free; at least they better have real ice cream!

