

FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOU

THE JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY
THAT LEADS TO SELF-ESTEEM



Module 4 – Worksheet 6

Guilt

Guilt is a complex emotion familiar to most people. Those who are able to feel guilt are usually compassionate, caring individuals who are aware of the influence their words and actions have on others. When experienced at appropriate times guilt lets you know that you have done something that violates one of your values and doesn't feel comfortable for you. You might feel you've done something 'wrong,' and be reminded to look at and learn from your thoughts or behavior.

However, when experienced inappropriately, guilt becomes a means of control and manipulation, and can erode your sense of personal power and self-esteem.

Often one person will try to make another feel guilty in order to control them. Or you might use guilt on yourself, to "punish" yourself for doing, saying, or thinking something that you feel is "wrong".

The problem with guilt is in the definition of the word "wrong." Once again we are talking about "shoulds." If you choose to follow all of your family and societal "shoulds" (which is pretty impossible) you probably won't experience much guilt because you won't be doing anything "wrong." You may, however, feel stressed, powerless, out-of-control, and frustrated because you're trying to live up to unrealistic expectations that aren't yours.

On the other hand, if you choose to go against some "shoulds" and meet your own needs instead, guilt will probably rear its ugly head. If you believe the "shoulds," but instead choose to meet your own needs, you may define what you're doing as "wrong" and feel guilty about it.

Guilt can be very useful, because it is like a red flag that pops up to let you know you've violated a value. The important thing is that once you notice this, you have the power to decide for yourself if guilt is appropriate in the situation, and whether or not to accept it. Choosing to meet your own needs rather than those of others is usually not a good reason to feel and accept guilt, from yourself or others.

If you feel something is right for you, and others feel it is "wrong," is guilt a necessary emotion for you to feel? Probably not, although you may have been taught to feel it anyway.

For example, society has a strong "should" surrounding the Thanksgiving holidays in November. This is "supposed to be" a family time, when folks travel from near and far to spend time with relatives.

If, for whatever reason, you choose not to participate in this ritual, the people involved may try to "make you feel guilty" (thereby manipulating you into feeling so badly that you give in and meet their needs). However, if you are comfortable with **your right to meet your own needs** (i.e. going skiing, visiting friends, or just being alone) then you can honestly tell yourself you've done nothing "wrong," and choose to not feel guilty about the situation. Whether you accept the guilt laid down by others is your choice. Just because it's laid down, does NOT mean you have to pick it up.

Once you've noticed the red flag of guilt and have acknowledged it, be sure to **put the flag down and let go of the guilt**. Then make your decision about what actions to take from there.

Exercise: Guilt

This exercise is designed to assist you in looking at where you allow guilt to fit into your life and help you decide if you want to keep it there. Take a few minutes to think about times or situations in which you've felt guilty, and then write in the spaces on the following pages.

Situations in which I am feeling guilty or have felt guilt:

"*Shoulds*" (values and/or old message) I broke to bring on this guilt:

People involved whom I allowed to "make me feel guilty":

Alternate ways I could have responded to these situations:

Reflections on Guilt

- Guilt rears its ugly head when you go against the values, "*shoulds*" and expectations from your childhood.
- You have been taught to feel guilty when you don't meet others' "*shoulds*."
- You have the power and right to decide if guilt is appropriate in any given situation.
- You choose to accept guilt - other people don't "MAKE" you feel guilty.
- You can choose to not feel guilty at any time.