

This article was originally published in Image Magazine

July / 2010

- You can find more information [here](#) -

GUILT

Written by Emily Hourican

I am an expert on guilt. I must be – I'm Irish, Catholic, a woman, a mother, and I work... that's guilty on all five counts I would say. And yet, that said, there is a world of difference between the kind of guilt that pretty much goes with the above territory, and involves niggles about tasks undone, shoes that were too expensive, bills not paid, a cross word uttered in the heat of a difficult moment, and the kind that threatens to actually drown those who suffer from it.

The first is vaguely helpful – it reminds us of things we need to do, or do better, or not do at all, and strengthens our resolve – while the second is frankly crippling. It is too general, too vast, and seems to carry with it cruel labels – 'Bad Mother!', 'Useless Person!' 'Failure!' – rather than strategic suggestions.

The first type of guilt seems to have a clear evolutionary pedigree – it's useful in keeping us up to the mark, and as such helps us perform better. "Guilt is like your conscience," says Brendan McKiernan, family therapist with the Bray Counselling & Therapy Centre. "Guilt can be constructive – you feel guilty if you have made a mistake, this can help you not to make that mistake again, or in the case of a child, apologise for the mistake and feel remorse." So even though I know it is pointless to feel guilty on the weeks when I'm busy and the family eats nothing but ready meals, the feeling will (well, might) lead me to plan ahead better next time and fill the freezer with delicious and nutritious dinners. That – if it happens – is a good thing.

But the second type, while Brendan describes as guilt related to shame, is where the problems really start. "Shame is where you feel, not that you have made a mistake, but that you **are** a mistake," he explains. "The more shame-based a person is, the lower their self-esteem and the more guilty they feel. In such a case, the person becomes their own jury, finding themselves guilty of every accusation. If you have healthy self-esteem, guilt over something done wrong is useful. But a shame-based person feels guilty about simply being themselves."

That person may well try and cover their sense of shame with a veneer of perfectionism (apparently women do this a lot, whereas men tend to choose materialism or excessive

machoism as compensating strategies for excessive guilt), but this, says McKiernan, is a rotten set-up. “No one is perfect. Pretending you are will only end by making you feel worse, because you end up in a negative cycle. You set yourself up, inevitably you fail, this makes you feel bad and leaves you with an even greater need to try and feel perfect. It’s a way of avoiding feelings of negativity about yourself, but as a strategy, it doesn’t work.” This of course makes perfect sense. How often have all of us determined to throw, say, the perfect toddlers’ birthday party, and impress the other school-gate mums with our effortless sense of style and ability to create matching place-names for under-fives, only for the cake to sink, the muesli bars to be chucked skyward with cries of ‘Yuck!’ and the birthday boy to have the mother of all tantrums? The net result? You feel far more of a failure than if you’d just thrown a blanket on the ground and dished up some Marks & Spencers cupcakes.

The kind of bad guilt we’re talking about isn’t just an unpleasant feeling, it’s a serious psychological ailment, with potential physical repercussions. Life coach Willie Horton, who has been running personal development courses for almost 15 years (www.gurdy.net), is adamant on this point. “Many studies have directly linked physical and health related issues to the imaginary problem of stress, and guilt is no different. Excessive guilt, like stress or worry, inevitably leads to physical problems – lack of sleep, eating disorders, depression, weakened immune system. These, in their turn lead to ongoing and potentially dangerous physical side effects.” The old expression, ‘sick with worry,’ is clearly more than just a cliché then.

So where does all this shame and consequent guilt come from? “From our subconscious mind,” says Horton. “The subconscious runs, and sometimes ruins, our lives and, normally, we have no control over it. Guilt may arise as a result of our behaviour (losing our temper, manipulating someone else, some unsavoury habit, buying new clothes, eating too much – and, of course, guilt can equally result from something that we haven’t done that we know we should have done) but our behaviour is automatically dictated by our subconscious mind.” And this behaviour is produced out of something called ‘stored knowledge,’ learned during our formative childhood years. Behaviour, then, is not a rational response to the situation in front of us, it’s an automatic reaction to something impressed on us during our childhood, perhaps the way a significant adult reacted to us, or behaved in their own life. Truly then, there is nothing new under the sun, only old reactions constantly recycled! Which is a depressing idea, except that there are ways to combat it, which we’ll get to later.

The bad news for most of us, is that being Irish brings with it a disproportionate level of guilt. We are, says Brendan McKiernan, “quite a shame-based culture. There are layers of shame related to the Irish identity going back to our colonial past, and more layers around sexuality

and bodies, because of the Catholic Church. Being Irish pre-disposes us to feel shame and guilt.” Just ask George Clooney, who apparently feels bad about earning so much money; “I’m an Irish Catholic kid, you know,” he said. “I was broke for a long time, so I have a lot of guilt about that.

Happily, our monopoly on guilt is changing, thanks to a more concrete sense of identity and the revolt against the church. Currently, we’re in transition, although he reckons we have a long way to go. Interestingly, McKiernan explains that in times of crisis, we all tend to revert to our weakest inclination. So given that something significant has gone wrong with our culture and society in the last few years, we tend to blame ourselves for this. When we lose our jobs, or fail to earn enough money, we turn the blame inward rather than outward.

Women, as I suspect we all knew, are particularly good at this. Something to do with the way we are brought up and the messages society gives us about our roles and sexuality, mean that we are way more likely to feel guilt. And this seems to be irrespective of external achievement. The bizarre feeling of being ‘found out,’ somehow exposed for the frauds we feel we must be, is just as common among female CEOs as it is among office cleaners. Willie Horton attributes this in part to that elusive thing, feminine intuition; “women are more attuned to their subconscious. What might be loosely described as ‘feminine intuition’ means that women are more aware of their subconscious reactions. As a consequence, women are more likely to identify with their inner ‘emotions’ whereas men have been programmed – through evolution and socio-sexual stereotyping – to be more apparently action-orientated.”

The great thing to aim for is a balanced position on guilt, which can be summed up as “ok, I lost my temper, but given the circumstances, I can forgive myself for that. I did the best I could at that moment.” It’s the difference between realising that we do some things well and others badly, and that sinking feeling of “I’m not good enough. I wreck everything...”

There are different types of guilt – in extreme cases, we can find ourselves feeling guilty over the things done by those close to us, our partners’ table manners for example, or even anticipatory guilt, over things that haven’t even happened – but the core is the same in each case, and always goes back to childhood. And of course it’s a vicious cycle; if you feel bad about yourself, you invite criticism, and so you feel worse about yourself.

The hardest thing, says Brendan McKiernan, for someone suffering from excessive shame and guilt, is to reveal themselves as they actually are, without any of the defensive constructs we adopt to hide vulnerability. Because they assume they will not be liked for who they are.

“The worse someone feels about who they are, the less they want people to really know them.” And yet, self-revelation is exactly what they need to engage in. “Negativity prospers in secrecy,” McKiernan points out. “So its very important to talk to somebody. You will reduce the bad feelings by bringing them into the light of day. These are unconscious feelings; once you put words on them, you can tackle them. Talk to someone about the parts of yourself you don’t like; once you see that you are accepted for who you are, the feelings will diminish.” And the best place to do this, is with others with similar situations. Ie, if you are struggling to believe in yourself as a mother, talk to other mothers about what you think you get wrong. If you think you’re a rubbish girlfriend, talk to your pals in relationships about their limits and expectations.

The key thing is to talk, talk, talk, because it does work. One friend, who for years suffered so much anxiety and guilt that she gradually developed a habit of hand-washing that left her hands red-raw (not surprisingly, they call this Lady Macbeth Syndrome), and her sense of self in tatters, eventually broached the topic with close friends. From there, she recalls, it wasn’t a huge step to bring it thoroughly out into the open, even make a joke of it and gently mock herself for the overweening sense of duty that left her feeling she’d failed at every turn. These days, she accepts that part of herself, “my totally over-active sense of guilt” she calls it, and as a result has almost banished it. The feeling of not being good enough has been replaced by a healthier feeling of simply doing her best, however objectively ‘good’ that might or might not be.

Ultimately, guilt is a useless thought. It is unreal, unhelpful and destructive, a perceived emotion related to things that happened in the past. It is also a clear sign that the sufferer is not living in the moment, the ultimate goal for anyone seeking a fulfilled life. When you think how guilty some of us can feel over feeling guilty, well, the vicious absurdity becomes perfectly clear. So let’s hear it for “good enough” rather than “perfect”, and a hefty dose of self-mockery for the silly standards we don’t really want to measure up to. After all, what is pleasure without a teeny-tiny bit of guilt?

SIDEBAR

Beat The Guilt

Accept It: If you really have done something you’re ashamed of, face up to it. Examine it. Apologise to anyone you think you have hurt because of it. Then move on. Talk about it. Identify the negative feelings, show them the light of day. You’d be amazed how quickly they shrivel.

Be Aware: The secret to a guilt-free, happy and abundant life is to become more aware of what is going on in your head, what is creating your apparent emotions and what is driving your behaviour.

Choose Your Thoughts: We're adults, and have some control over the subconscious. Choose the thoughts you give your energy to, and practise full awareness of all five senses. This will break the bad cycle of subconscious automatic reactive behaviour.

Break Small Habits: Brush your teeth with the other hand, get dressed with the 'wrong' arm or leg first. This will force you to pay more attention, and it will confirm to your subconscious mind that you can exercise choice.

Give Yourself a Break: Accept that you are human, and that whatever action you take at a particular moment is the best you were capable of. Next time, maybe you'll do better, but at that time, you did all you could.

Don't Regret: Regret implies judgement on yourself. Avoid it.

-

About the author:

Emily Hourican is a journalist and author based in Dublin, Ireland.

More information can be found in emilyhourican.com