

5 Science-Backed Tips For Getting Rid of Guilt

You did something bad. And now you feel terrible. But the feeling won't go away. It gnaws at you. Even worse, it makes you feel like you're a bad person.

Nobody tells us how to deal with this. There certainly weren't any classes on it in high school. But one expert has some answers to make you feel better.

David Burns, MD, is a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical School and author of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. That book title sounds a little "self-helpy" though, doesn't it? Well, here's something you don't see often: Burns actually ran a study to determine whether his book was effective or not. Turns out it had major results.

The results of this study indicated that *Feeling Good* appeared to have substantial antidepressant effects. At the end of the first four-week Bibliotherapy period, 70 percent of the patients in the Immediate Bibliotherapy Group no longer met the criteria for a major depressive episode, according to the diagnostic criteria for a major depressive episode that are outlined in the American Psychiatric Association's official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). In fact, the improvement was so great most of these patients did not need any further treatment at the medical center.

Cool. So his work can help us.

Now let's see why we feel guilt, how it works and the best way to overcome it and live happier lives.

Why do we feel guilty?

As you know, being wracked with guilt is awful. So why do we feel it?

What's crazy is that neuroscience research shows our brains actually reward us for feeling guilt.

Despite their differences, pride, shame, and guilt all activate similar neural circuits, including the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, amygdala, insula, and the nucleus accumbens. Interestingly, pride is the most powerful of these emotions at triggering activity in these regions — except in the nucleus accumbens, where guilt and shame win out. This explains why it can be so appealing to heap guilt and shame on ourselves — they're activating the brain's reward center.

Guilt serves a powerful social function in terms of policing our behavior.

Research published in the *Harvard Business Review* shows that people prone to guilt work harder and are seen as better leaders:

People who are prone to guilt tend to work harder and perform better than people who are not guilt-prone, and are perceived to be more capable leaders.

In fact, people who often feel guilty are better friends, lovers and employees:

...people who expect to feel guilty tend to be more sympathetic, to put themselves into other people's shoes, to think about the consequences of their behaviour before acting, and to treasure their morals. As a result they are less prone to lie, cheat or behave immorally when they conduct a business deal or spot an opportunity to make money, studies suggest. They are also likely to make better employees because people who think less about the future results of their actions are more likely to be late, to steal or to be rude to clients.

And as moms around the world know, guilt does cause them to improve their behavior: In three studies, people who recalled their immoral behavior reported greater participation in moral activities (Study 1), reported stronger prosocial intentions (Study 2), and showed less cheating (Study 3) than people who recalled their moral behavior.

So there's a good reason we feel guilty. But is guilt the best feeling to have when we've done something wrong? Far from it.

The downsides of guilt turn out to be far worse than the benefits.

The downside of guilt

Part of the problem with guilt is that we think we should feel bad because of what we've done wrong. That's a noble gesture, but research shows it's not the best way to motivate us to act better or feel better in the future.

Study after study shows that self-criticism is consistently associated with less motivation and worse self-control. It is also one of the single biggest predictors of depression, which drains both "I will" power and "I want" power.

Now I know what you might be thinking: If I don't feel guilty, won't I go on to do more bad things and eventually become a psychopathic axe murderer?

Nope. Forgiving yourself, not guilt, increases personal accountability.

Surprisingly, it's forgiveness, not guilt, that increases accountability. Researchers have found that taking a self-compassionate point of view on a personal failure makes people more likely to take personal responsibility for the failure than when they take a self-critical point of view. They also are more willing to receive feedback and advice from others, and more likely to learn from the experience.

What's really insidious about guilt is that we often feel it after things that are pleasurable (like eating unhealthy food) so, with time, we can actually associate guilt with pleasure.

And so now things that made you feel guilty are actually perceived as even more rewarding:

...participants who had been primed for guilt both liked the candy more and said they would be willing to pay more for it than those primed with neutral words. Guilt also made the initial pleasurable reaction last longer — the guilt-primed participants remembered liking the candies more than neutral-primed participants.

Ouch. Guilt makes you more attracted to behaviors that will make you feel guilty.

So guilt's not the best way to remedy your mistakes. So what should you do? Science has answers.

Stop "magnifying"

You broke your diet. You insulted your friend. Bad stuff. Nobody disputes that. But should you feel bad weeks or months later?

When we're rational about rule-breaking we set a limit. You don't get 30 years in prison for a traffic ticket. But sometimes you sentence yourself to months or years of emotional pain over minor offenses.

What sentence will you choose to impose on yourself? Are you willing to stop suffering and making yourself miserable when your sentence has expired? This would at least be a responsible way to punish yourself because it would be time-limited.

But with guilt, we're often irrational. How can we know if we're being rational? Look at the intensity, duration and consequences of the negative emotions you feel. Are they appropriate? Probably not.

In addition to distortion, several other criteria can be helpful in distinguishing abnormal guilt from a healthy sense of remorse or regret. These include the intensity, duration, and consequences of your negative emotion.

You're magnifying the offense. Again, you probably have noble intentions. You feel you deserve to be punished. But the problem is just like fear — it can go too far.

If a hungry lion suddenly appeared, you'd be terrified. So terrified you'd probably run away. Great, fear's doing its job. But you might get so afraid that you lock up and can't move. This would be very bad. Guilt's the same. It can prevent you from fixing the situation, make you feel so bad you can't function at 100% and even lead to more guilt-provoking bad behavior.

You're better at fixing the mistakes you make when you recognize you did something wrong but still feel good enough about yourself to get off your butt and rectify things.

More often than not, the belief that you are bad contributes to the "bad" behavior. Change and learning occur most readily when you (a) recognize that an error has occurred and (b) develop a strategy for correcting the problem. An attitude of self-love and relaxation facilitates this, whereas guilt often interferes.

And that leads us to the worst kind of magnification, which is all too common: feeling your bad behavior makes you a bad person. Here's how to deal with that.

Thinking you're a bad person makes you a bad person

The guilt is overwhelming. You just feel that you're rotten to the core for what you did. Guess what? That feeling makes you more likely to do bad things in the future.

As Duke professor Dan Ariely explains, believing you are a bad person leads to a slippery slope. Why resist temptation to do evil when you believe that's your nature?

What we find in our experiments is that once we start thinking of ourselves as polluted, there is not much incentive to behave well, and the trip down the slippery slope is likely.

If you break your diet or give in to temptation, you might tell yourself, "I have no self-control." Does that sound like a belief that's going to lead to better behavior in the future? Uh, no.

The major thing that holds you back when you're trying to change a bad habit like eating, smoking, or drinking too much is your belief you are out of control.

The problem here is that emotions like guilt are so powerful that they affect your reasoning. You feel bad, so you think you must be bad.

You automatically assume that because you're feeling guilty, you must have fallen short in some way and that you deserve to suffer. You reason, "I feel bad, therefore I must be bad." This is irrational because your self-loathing does not necessarily prove that you did anything wrong. Your guilt just reflects the fact that you believe you behaved badly.

But this comes from an irrational belief: "To be a good person I need to be good all the time." Is that even remotely realistic? Hardly.

Can you predict the future with absolute certainty? Again your answer must be no. You have two options: You can either decide to accept yourself as an imperfect human being with limited knowledge and realize that you will at times make mistakes, or you can hate yourself for it.

So how do you cope with the feeling that you're bad to the bone?

You are not your actions

Now I'm not saying you're not responsible for your actions. You are. But you are not defined by any one bad action.

So what's the answer here? It's USA. (No, not the country. Famed psychologist Albert Ellis calls it "Universal Self Acceptance.")

It's irrational to assume you can ever truly evaluate yourself as a good or bad human being. You will never have enough information.

That "bad person" at work who torments you might be an excellent father to his kids. That other "bad person" at work who screwed up royally today? That error might later lead to a huge breakthrough.

We will never have enough info to holistically evaluate a person and score them in totality as "bad" or "good."

So accept yourself. But realize your behaviors can be bad.

But what is the point of abusing yourself with guilt in the first place? If you did make a mistake and act in a hurtful way, your guilt won't reverse your blunder in some magical manner. It won't speed your learning processes so as to reduce the chance you'll make the same mistake in the future. Other people won't love and respect you more because you are feeling guilty and putting yourself down in this manner. Nor will your guilt lead to productive living. So what's the point?

Guilt doesn't help. What should fill in for it? Remorse.

Remorse is when you feel bad about what you did. Guilt is when you feel bad about who you are.

This concept of the "badness" of self is central to guilt. In its absence, your hurtful action might lead to a healthy feeling of remorse but not guilt. Remorse stems from the undistorted awareness that you have willfully and unnecessarily acted in a hurtful manner toward yourself or another person that violates your personal ethical standards. Remorse differs from guilt because there is no implication your transgression indicates you are inherently bad, evil, or immoral. To put it in a nutshell, remorse or regret are aimed at behavior, whereas guilt is targeted toward the "self."

So you're not a bad person. You'll never have enough information to make that judgment. But your behavior can be bad. Which leads us to the next issue: how do you best make amends for your mistakes and feel better?

How to feel better

You've accepted you're not a bad person. But you did something bad.
A lot of people think they'd feel less guilty if they had more self-esteem.

Wrong.

You don't need more self-esteem. You need more self-compassion.
You're human. You'll screw up. Denying that is crazy. Forgiving yourself has all the benefits of self-esteem without making you a narcissist that's out of touch with reality.

The bottom line is that according to the science, self-compassion appears to offer the same advantages as high self-esteem, with no discernible downsides. The first thing to know is that self-compassion and self-esteem do tend to go together. If you're self-compassionate, you'll tend to have higher self-esteem than if you're endlessly self-critical. And like high self-esteem—self-compassion is associated with significantly less anxiety and depression, as well as more happiness, optimism, and positive emotions.

Want to stop feeling like a bad person? USA is a great start and self-compassion is a great chaser. It increases your self-worth.

...self-compassion was clearly associated with steadier and more constant feelings of self-worth than self-esteem. We also found that self-compassion was less likely than self-esteem to be contingent on particular outcomes like social approval, competing successfully, or feeling attractive. When our sense of self-worth stems from being a human being intrinsically worthy of respect — rather than being contingent on obtaining certain ideals — our sense of self-worth is much less easily shaken.
So forgive yourself and be ready to forgive yourself in the future. You're gonna screw up. It's okay.

Next you'll want to apologize if you hurt someone else.

Apologies do make a difference. Believe it or not, research shows people often prefer them over money.

What's the most important thing to remember when apologizing?

Don't apologize for what you think you did wrong. Apologize for what they think you did wrong.

And there's one last step to getting past guilt: ask yourself, "What can I learn from this?"

Am I learning from my error and developing a strategy for change, or am I moping and ruminating non-productively or even punishing myself in a destructive manner?

Regret has a purpose. It's like the oil light on the dashboard of your life, telling you something needs to be fixed.

So fix it. And feel better.

Alright, we've covered a lot. Let's round it up and learn the right attitude to take to avoid those guilty feelings in the future.

Sum up

Here's how to stop feeling guilty:

- **Stop magnifying:** Ask yourself if your self-punishment fits the crime. It probably doesn't.
- **You are not your actions:** You're responsible for your actions but they don't make you a bad person. Remember USA.
- **Self-compassion:** Forgiving yourself makes you behave better. Thinking you're a bad person makes you act worse.
- **Apologize:** Say you're sorry for what they think you did wrong, not what you think you did wrong.
- **Ask "What can I learn from this?":** Torturing yourself doesn't make you a better person. Learning does.

You'll screw up again. It will happen. But you don't have to be tortured by guilt again. In his book, Burns explains the best attitude to take:

Learn to accept your limits and you'll become a happier person. Forgive yourself. Repair the damage. And move on. You're not a bad person. But you sometimes do bad things. You know what that makes you?

Human.

Source: <https://theweek.com/articles/641092/5-sciencebacked-tips-getting-rid-guilt>