

Guilt vs. Regret?

“Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving . . . and giving, and giving.” ... (Erma Bombeck)...

Guilt is that feeling of not measuring up to our own or others' expectations – that feeling of having violated an “assumed” rule that a *better* person would have done better.

Guilt is “gifted” to us by others, but more often gifted to ourselves. We have an internal standard of what a “good daughter/son, wife/husband, sister/brother” would do or say, and this internal standard was developed early in life when things were clearly “good” or “bad” and the rules broad and general: “do unto others...”, “honor thy mother and father”, “others first, me last.” These *generic* rules worked when things were simpler and predictable, but life doesn't stay that way. Things get more complicated, and we are faced with situations we never anticipated, and for which there are no clear road maps.

These “simple rules” cannot cover the complexity of what we are facing, and we feel guilty for what we cannot change.

Guilt is a very useful and appropriate feeling when you have actually done something you clearly know is wrong, and you do it anyway. Then you *should* feel guilty. But when things happen over which you have no control (serious illness, loved ones on drugs, overwhelming expectations of someone in your life), then the appropriate feeling is regret – you *regret* that things are this way, but you cannot change them. Guilt over what you cannot change is inappropriate.

If you were a robot with these simple generic rules programmed in, they would work every time! – because they would not be clouded with personal emotions. But....if something is beyond your control, feel ‘regret’ that things are as they are, but let go of the guilt.

This is not permission to be unkind and hurtful, but a recognition that sometimes unmanageable stress pushes us beyond our capacities. We need to apologize (i.e., I'm sorry I can't fix this situation), forgive ourselves, and get on with the tasks of life.

When someone is handing you guilt, you do not have to reach out and take it. Put your hands in your pockets and refuse to accept someone else's judgment. And if you find that you're imposing guilt upon yourself, ask... “Is this situation actually regret over something I can't control?” Guilt saps the energy we need to accomplish the tasks in front of us. Give yourself the gift of self-acceptance of your being totally human, and not an unfeeling robot.

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