

Anatomy of Parent Guilt

Patricia Morgan © 2002

Why do many parents, mothers in particular, feel guilty when they take time for themselves? First let's examine the feeling of guilt. There is healthy and unhealthy guilt. Healthy guilt has sadness underlying it, a sense of true regret for a chosen behaviour that created harm or some problem, often for others. Unhealthy guilt is a feeling of shame, that we aren't OK as we are, that we *should* be different than we are and *should* make different choices. We have beliefs like "We *should* put everybody else first." There are some healthy *shoulds* that are actually values, virtues and morals in action. We really should look after the earth, avoid racism and care for our elderly, disabled and disadvantaged. It is the unhealthy *shoulds* that create the dis-ease and stress in ourselves and our families.

Many parents believe they *should* make their children happy. They are told "You make your children so happy" or "You broke her heart." The reality is that we have influence on one another, including our children, but we do not have the power to MAKE anyone feel anything. We may trigger a reaction but there it ends. Of course we aim to be sensitive to each other's tender spots and choose to use respectful language. John Gray in *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* explains that men tend (there are exceptions) to have success feelings when they think they *made* their wife and children happy. Meanwhile women tend to feel responsible for everyone and all their feelings. Training of the female in my era reinforced this habit. I remember my mother repeatedly giving me the plate of sweets at socials with the instructions to "make sure everyone is happy and has what they want." She trained me to be on the watch for others' needs, not to consider taking a sweet for myself until others were looked after and not to question that my brothers were off playing and "being boys."

Then there are those voices of people from our past or in our circle with their *shoulds*. "You should stay home with your children" or "You shouldn't be staying at home with children after your parents paid for all that education." Don't let people *should* on you. Just because some people are uncomfortable with our decisions does not mean that we *should* live our lives so they can feel right. Moreover, observe and censor your own menu of *shoulds*. Being driven in life through unhealthy, and usually meaningless, *shoulds*, can create resentment and meaninglessness.

Here is an exercise to transform your guilt and unhealthy *should* messages into self care.

1. Complete these two sentences as many times as you can.
I feel guilty about . . .
I feel guilty when . . .

2. Take each issue in the above sentences and complete the following sentences.
 - a) *What I resent* (about other people's behaviour, words, lack of support or pressure) *is . . .*
 - b) *What I regret* (doing or not doing: saying or not saying) *is . . .*
3. Take your a) list of resentments and tell yourself. "I don't have control over other people. I will now let go."
4. Take your b) list of regrets and complete the following sentence:
In order to take better care of myself from now on I will . . .

Patricia Morgan is a certified counsellor, speaker and author of
Love Her As She Is and *She Said: A Tapestry of Women's Quotes*
She can be reached at 403-242-7796
or patricia@lightheartedconcepts.com or www.lightheartedconcepts.com