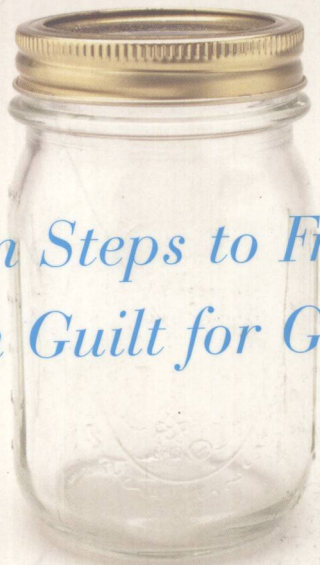


# ESCAPING TOXIC GUILT



*Five Proven Steps to Free Yourself  
from Guilt for Good!*

SAN CARRELL, RN, LPC

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# Preface

I don't travel much, but I've been on a guilt trip since I can remember. My life reads like a travelogue of guilt. I hate to think about the psychic fuel I've burned worrying whether I've let someone down. The carsick queasiness of feeling I've not been good enough, or careful enough, or just *enough* is all too familiar. Preoccupation with what will so-and-so think has a nauseating roll to it as well.

I stayed home when my children were small and felt guilty for not using my education and contributing to society. When I went back to work, I felt guilty because I couldn't be there for my kids. I hung out six years too long in a bad marriage to a drug-abusing physician. Why? Too guilty to leave—after all, he needed me.

I institutionalized the rest of my care-taking tendencies: First I became a registered nurse and devoted myself to caring for people in psychiatric hospitals and treatment centers. My own good emotional health and fortunate circumstances compared to those in my care gave me an unremitting case of guilt—I owed, *I owed*. Then I became an Episcopal chaplain. I felt chronically guilty in that position—can a minister ever give or do enough? In my early days as a Licensed Professional Counselor, I cringed with guilt every time a client didn't grow and blossom as I expected he or she should. So I know guilt intimately.

In my work as a therapist and relationship coach, I've seen myself in the lives of many of my clients. They are people who try their best to do the right thing, compassionate individuals who respect the feelings of others, rule-following folk, responsible citizens—good people whose life journey has been complicated, compromised, or completely derailed by guilt.

Folks on perpetual guilt trips seem more vulnerable to the wretched emotion than others. It's as if some personality types are born to be overly giving and feel guilty when they fall the least bit short of their own high standards. In many ways they are prisoners of guilt, trapped by good intentions, perfectionism, an inflated sense of responsibility, and misinterpretations of religious expectations.

Flawed beliefs learned from family systems, societal precepts, and religious heritage are the underlying culprits. What if it *isn't* so noble to organize your life around other people's needs? What if it's possible for you to be a good person *without* taking care of every needy soul who passes your way? And what if you're *wrong* about what you think God expects of you? I have explored beliefs learned from family, society, and religion that I once took as bed-rock, and I have discovered that they often fall short because they are simplistic answers to complex problems.

The powerfully dark side of guilt can trap a man or woman in a miserable marriage, enslave the parents of an errant child, and keep a person from claiming his or her sexual identity. My desire is to bring hope and liberation to good people who struggle with difficult life situations in which guilt is winning over reason, good judgment, and faith.

I think a story is the best teacher, and so most of the ideas and concepts presented are illustrated through storytelling. A mental health professional is a story collector, and I have been collecting people's stories for over twenty years. All the stories used are real stories of real people. I have carefully disguised the identities of my clients by altering certain facts such as name, occupation, age, or gender and on occasion have combined the stories of two or more clients with similar features. I also share my own stories and hope they lend credibility and sincerity to the work.

You will find self-score quizzes in many chapters. These are not scientifically constructed examinations but are meant to be guides to help you decide if guilt is behind your trouble. Although it is possible that if you answer yes to even one question guilt could be the culprit, I have placed an arbitrary number of yes responses in each quiz to offer a reasonable prediction of guilt. I hope the quizzes stimulate your thinking and help you uncover guilt if it is there.

# Acknowledgments

**I**t takes a village to write a book, and I have a village of people to thank—but I will narrow the list to the main contributors. First and foremost I thank my clients for allowing me to participate in their lives. It is an honor to work with people who courageously search below the surface to find their true identity and live into it with determination. I am grateful for my agent, Regina Ryan, who was willing to take on a rookie and is the best coach ever. I am thankful for my editor, John Aherne, who understood me and was able to bring out the best of what I have to offer. I was lucky enough to have found Carol Conway, my freelance editor who helped me craft the first draft into a workable document. I am indebted to my dear friends and colleagues, Maggie Megalynn and Paula Caplan, who were always encouraging, generous with their time, and let me pick their brains at will. Last but not least, I am blessed to have Winston, my true companion, who listened to my ideas, kept me from losing sight of the mission, tolerated the time lost to us, and supported me with unwavering affection.

# Introduction

## A Hidden Net

**A**re you marooned in a marriage that is not affirming and joyful? Do you feel trapped in a dead-end relationship? Do you have a valued friend who sucks the life out of you? Is your life dictated by your needy and demanding children? Are you stuck in a job that you hate? Does the need to please your parents rob you of healthy independence? Does keeping in-laws happy cause conflict between you and your spouse? Are you unable to claim your sexuality? Are you unintentionally pregnant and unable to make important decisions about what to do?

If any of these situations describe your life, this book will help. Being trapped in a painful relationship or distressing situation is a miserable state of affairs. It's like being shipwrecked in a whirlpool. You thrash about frantically just to keep your head above water while you go 'round and 'round.

In my sixteen years as a licensed counselor and relationship coach, I have worked with many good people who suffer needlessly because they are caught in a powerful current that renders them helpless. I am able to help my clients break free because I know and understand the force behind their struggle. It's a force they often don't recognize. It is a force that is powerful, pervasive, and can affect every single aspect of their lives. The name of this powerful force? Guilt.

Maybe you already understand that guilt is the problem but find you are powerless to overcome your feelings. On the other



hand, maybe all you know right now is that you are trapped in a distressing situation, and you can't break free and move on. You ask yourself again and again: why can't I do this?

You may have racked your brain, talked to friends, and read a book or two in a concerted effort to figure out why you can't do something to straighten out your life. You think that if you could only figure out what is holding you back, you could begin to change things. But if guilt is behind your immobility—and there is a very good chance it is—you might not be able to recognize it.

Guilt is tricky and delights in disguise; it is subtle and insidious. Guilt is also one of the deepest and darkest emotions in the human condition. Even if guilt doesn't play the leading role in your troubles, it's very likely that it is involved in your situation to some degree.

Some people are more prone to the ravages of guilt than others. If you are reading this, chances are you are vulnerable to guilt. You quickly and easily feel guilty about all sorts of things. You are a "good person" who tries to make the world a better place, a "responsible person" who holds yourself accountable for your actions. Others see you as dependable and reliable. But although you work hard to have good relationships, deep down you may feel powerless because you know that others have more power over you than they should. Maybe you frequently feel used. When I talk about feeling trapped, you know exactly what I mean.

To begin the process of breaking free and escaping guilt, you need to find out if it is holding you prisoner. If you already know that guilt is the culprit, you're ahead of the game, but you will benefit from additional understanding of the trouble the emotion can cause and from new ways to think about it.

I am not interested in changing your basic personality, and you shouldn't be either. You are probably like many guilt-ridden people—sensitive about and responsive to the needs of others. If that describes you, then you have a quality that is valued and

needed on this planet and that you should value in yourself. What we want to do is hone this basic ability into a way of being in the world that is good for both you and others. I'll be your coach in this adventure, and as with any good coach, my job is to help you bring out the best in yourself. An athlete has innate strength and aptitude, as do you; my goal is to strengthen the abilities you already have and help you develop new skills so you can play the game of life in the most effective way possible.

In order to overcome the power of guilt, it is important to understand the nature of the emotion. Part I provides that knowledge by examining the key characteristics of guilt and explaining some of its most important psychological and cultural underpinnings. This is followed by a look at the types of people who seem to be experts at making others feel guilty. Part II explores the eight most common guilt-inducing situations.

Once you figure out why you feel guilty, and which kind of person is most likely to make you feel guilty, it's time to do something about it. Over the years, I developed some key strategies for helping people move beyond their guilty feelings. In Part III, I will teach you to break free from guilt in a step-by-step process that you can apply in any guilt-laden situation. Here is an outline of the five steps.

- **Step One: Speak the Truth.** In Chapter 15, I will take you through the first step and help you see how important it is to be truthful with yourself about what is really holding you back. You must be able to identify and acknowledge the real problem of guilt. Maybe your situation makes you so anxious that your thoughts rush around too frantically for you to stop and analyze what is really going on. You feel you are working as hard as you can to make things better, but you don't seem to be getting anywhere.

It's as if you're on a bicycle. You pedal hard and you pedal fast; when it's clear you're not getting very far you pedal harder and

faster. You sweat and pant. Surely you're almost to the top. But then you look up and realize you're on a stationary bike, struggling for all you're worth but not moving forward at all. After working through Step One, progress will be possible because you'll be able to recognize what's keeping you locked in place. Step Two tells you what to do about it.

- **Step Two: Claim Territory.** Step Two, presented in Chapter 16, is the key step toward escaping toxic guilt. It's about claiming your basic rights as a human being. You probably do a great job of respecting the rights and needs of others, but you have to realize that you have rights and needs too. You have the right to own and protect your own emotional territory, without feeling guilty about it. I'll teach you about the concept of emotional boundaries, and help you understand what's happened to yours. I'll also teach you how to reach inside yourself to access what's already there: the ability to repair, reclaim, and restore your boundaries without guilt.

- **Step Three: Brace for the Storm.** Step Three in Chapter 17 prepares you for the inevitable consequences that will occur when you begin to change your behavior to break the cycle of toxic guilt. Some people in your life won't like it. This step will be a challenge if you've spent your life accommodating everyone else. I'll give you plenty of real-life stories to help bolster your courage as you get ready for the onslaught.

- **Step Four: Ride the Wind.** Step Four, outlined in Chapter 18, may be the most difficult because it's about finally letting go of those past behaviors and patterns. Although you expected the storm and braced for it, it will inevitably cause some damage. It's not always possible to repair the breaks in relationships that occur when you change your behavior to become less accommodating and less easily manipulated by guilt than you once were. Guilt-ridden people are usually "fixer" types. When there's even a bit of friction between you and another, you rush to make it all go away.

You may find it is very difficult to release your grip on a relationship or event. You will want to manipulate the outcome so that everything comes out on a positive note. Relinquishing control can be a daunting task, but the end result is liberating. I'll show you that letting go and riding the wind, instead of trying to direct it, is freedom itself.

- **Step Five: Patrol Borders.** As you'll see in Chapter 19, you will be at risk for repeating patterns of behavior that are much older than the new steps you've learned. Step Five will teach you how to protect your emotional property and maintain your boundaries as time goes by so that you won't succumb to your old habits.

You will come to know these five steps well and be able to put them into play when you feel yourself falling into old guilty patterns and habits. If you are serious, really serious, about moving forward, plan to work hard to get out of your comfort zone and really challenge and stretch yourself with these five steps. The struggle will come as you choose to see things differently and do things differently. As they say in twelve-step recovery programs: if you always do what you've always done you'll always get what you always got.

Doing something new is both exciting and frightening. It's exciting to think that things can be different, that you can break free, and it's frightening to change the way you've always seen things and done things.

When we learn something new, we feel stronger and better about ourselves. Remember when you first learned to ride a bike, or swim, or spell five new words? You were proud of yourself, right? You'll feel that way again as you work through the five steps. And you won't be on your own: I'll be coaching you every step of the way. I'll give you encouragement and pointers as we go, and when it's time you'll be ready. The strategy is simple and straightforward;

best of all, it works. Although you won't become guilt-free, you will be able to manage your guilty feelings instead of allowing your guilty feelings to manage you.

I'll be encouraging you in every way, but only *you* can change yourself, and we human beings fervently resist change—even when we want it. You will have to be intentional and proactive.

So if you are tired of feeling trapped and controlled by others, and are ready to break free from the hold of guilt, read on. We have work to do!

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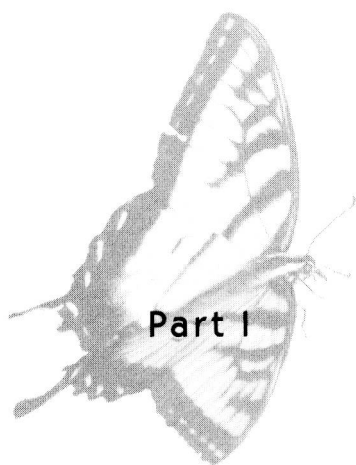
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Part I

# The Guilt Trap



