

## Living a Guilt-Free Life!

**G**uilt is handed on, person to person, as surely as the baton in a relay race. Each generation receives it and passes it on to the next. Parents, teachers, spouses, businesses, governments, and religions have used it—consciously or not—for behavior modification or punishment. It is such a part of the fabric of our culture that we don't question its validity.

### What is Guilt?

"Guilt is the source of sorrow, the avenging fiend...with whips and stings," wrote the 17th century dramatist, Nicholas Rowe. Rowe's words are hardly over-dramatized. Guilt is like a ball and chain that weighs us down and keeps us from being who we are.

Guilt is a secondary emotion. That means it's a feeling that stems from other thoughts or feelings. Guilt comes from thinking that you have done, or want to do, something wrong. These thoughts of guilt infect and suppress your real feelings, such as anger, grief, desire, or happiness.

Typically, we deal with feelings of guilt by denying them. However, denied feelings don't disappear; they submerge and stay unconscious, continuing to show up in negative patterns of behavior.

But the good news is that guilt is simply a conditioned response—which means we can change it.

### Getting a Handle on Guilt

First, remember that we are here to learn. Our culture has taught us that making mistakes is bad, but mistakes are simply a way of learning and growing, and provide excellent feedback.

**Acknowledge the guilt.** Become aware of the guilty feelings that overlay your true feelings. Listen to the "you should"

and "you shouldn't" messages that guilt whispers in your ear.

**Question your guilt.** Don't take it for granted. You were taught to feel guilty for feeling or behaving in a certain way. Are you willing to unlearn this behavior, and to release it? Examine what guilt is costing you and if it offers any positive results in your life.

**Recognize the difference between your conscience and guilt.** Our conscience provides us with a self-assured sense of right and wrong and is a helpful guide to behavior, while guilt is a form of brainwashing that erodes self-worth and our ability to make good judgments. Those "should" messages are a good indicator of the difference.

**Experience the feeling that guilt is suppressing.** Healing occurs when feelings are acknowledged and experienced. Jackie had been taught as a child that anger was an unacceptable emotion. Feeling angry with her husband, she became aware of the guilt—"I shouldn't be angry"—that was stopping her from speaking up. With that realization, Jackie's guilt evaporated. She expressed herself and, for the first time in her life, knew what guilt-free anger felt like: alive, clean, and clear.

**Move the guilt out of your body.** Identify where in your body you feel guilt; imagine all your guilt gathered there. See it now as if in a balloon, floating out of your body, into space. Or, write down all the reasons you "should" feel guilty—all those things you did or failed to do. Then burn the list.

Living your life forever feeling bad about yourself benefits nobody, least of all you. And the world is robbed of the fullness of who you are. ✨

## 10 Forms of Addiction Denial

*Few of us are eager to admit that our spouse, child, or friend has an addiction. Often we don't recognize the problem until authorities are involved. Then we ask how we could have missed the signs. Here are 10 guises that denial can take, adapted from Avoiding Relapse: Catching Your Inner Con, by Lynn Namka.*

**1. Denial of the facts.** The guidance counselor doesn't know what she's talking about. Our son is fine—he's getting straight-As.

**2. Denial of the significance of the facts.** I've never blacked-out or been drunk at work. I'm not a wino.

**3. Denial of the duration of the problem.** Once I get my degree, I'll stop taking stimulants.

**4. Denial that fosters false hope for future use.** After I break the habit, I can drink again at parties.

**5. Denial of emotions.** I need wine to deal with the stress. You'd drink, too, if you had my life.

**6. Denial regarding control.** I don't need those self-help meetings. I'm doing fine on my own.

**7. Denial of family secrets.** No one at the new school needs to know that our daughter was in rehab.

**8. Denial of lifestyle hazards.** I don't take drugs anymore; I'm just hanging out with my friends.

**9. Denial of responsibility.** I use, but it's not my fault. I get so much pressure from everyone.

**10. Denial of shame-based feelings.** I can't let myself know how bad I feel. ✨

# A Letter From *Margaret Hood Black*



Sometimes in our journey toward wholeness we find ourselves ensnared in cultural forces that seem to exert control over how we behave and feel. One of the more insidious agencies is guilt, which disguises our real feelings and blocks our true natures. The cover article explains what guilt is and how it operates, then offers several approaches for freeing yourself from its grip.

Tapping the power of your dreams is the focus of the article on page three. Numerous advances have been made by people who quite literally followed their dreams. Millions of others find counsel, inspiration and insight from their nightly stories. If you're new to working with your dreams, be sure to read the list of ways to improve recall and increase your understanding of dreams.

Also in this issue are 10 stealthy forms that denial can take, as well as the quiz, which can help you discover if you're giving too much of yourself away. Rounding out the issue are suggestions of ways to cultivate serenity by recognizing and taking action on what you do have control of in your life.

Enjoy this issue of the newsletter. If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

## Do You Give It All Away?

Most of us have been taught that it is more noble to give than to receive. While giving can be a wonderful, heart-warming experience, giving too much of our time and energy can be detrimental to both our physical and emotional health, leading to anxiety, overwhelm and burnout. Take this quiz to see if you are giving it all away.



### True False

- 1. I force myself to do things even when I don't have the energy to do them.
- 2. I ignore my body's "no" signals when I think someone's needs are greater than mine.
- 3. I hate conflict, so I'll do whatever it takes to avoid it, which often means doing something I don't want to do.
- 4. I feel obligated to answer the phone when it rings even when I really don't want to.
- 5. The amount of time I spend listening to others far exceeds the amount of time that others listen to me.
- 6. If I don't answer all the emails I receive I feel guilty.
- 7. In order to pay my family's bills I have to work more hours than I want to.
- 8. I schedule my work time around my clients' needs rather than around my own.
- 9. I can't say no when people in need ask me for money.
- 10. When I'm out to dinner with people who have less money than I do, I feel obligated to pick up the check.
- 11. I volunteer for my place of worship or other organizations even if I don't have the time.
- 12. People won't like me if I say no.
- 13. I'm the person everyone calls when they need help: a babysitter, chauffeur, or someone to fill in at work.
- 14. My children's happiness comes before mine. I'll do whatever it takes to make them happy.
- 15. I have a hard time saying no to my partner because I don't want him/her to feel unloved.
- 16. I feel selfish if I don't share what I have with others.

If you answered true more often than false, you may want to find ways to create more balance in your life by getting clear on your values and priorities and learning more about boundary setting. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to explore this issue further. \*

# Tapping the Power of Your Dreams

Most of us know that a good night's sleep decreases stress, increases memory recall, and improves overall functioning. Less well-known is that our nightly dreams also work to keep our psyches healthy and help us access our full potential. With just a little practice, we can learn to tap into this valuable source of information and use it to enhance every aspect of our personal and professional lives.

Every dream, no matter how small or strange, has a message for us. Dreams give us hints of what is to come, point out opportunities we are missing, and suggest creative solutions to problems we face. In the 1970s, producer Jerry Weintraub dreamt of a dazzling marquee that read: "Jerry Weintraub presents Elvis at Madison Square Garden." He followed his dream and brought Elvis back on the road, making millions.

To find out what your dreams are telling you, here are some things to listen for.



## The yes/no feeling after waking.

Jessica felt stifled by her job but was afraid to quit and strike out on her own. After a tumultuous day she went to sleep early and woke in the morning with a peaceful feeling of resolve, knowing that, in spite of her fear, leaving her job was the best decision.

**Questions answered through imagery.** David was considering leaving his wife when he dreamt of viewing his recently deceased father through a window. He interpreted the dream as saying that grieving was currently more important than making a big life change.

**Literal dream messages.** Samantha had a dream in which her heart fell out onto the sidewalk. She's an experienced dreamworker so she knew not to take the dream too literally, but since high blood pressure runs in her family, she went for a check-up. Her blood pressure was so high that her doctor said she could have had a heart attack at any time.

## More Ways Dreams Assist Us

Dreams help us manage change. Phyllis's workplace was undergoing restructuring but she thought her position was safe. She dreamt of walking into the office to find her desk bare and her coworkers gone. Several days later her whole team was laid off. Her dream had prepared her for the change even though

she hadn't wanted to admit it.

Dreams give us great ideas. Paul McCartney woke with a song in his head that he was sure belonged to someone else. He played it for friends and they all assured him it was new. Convinced, he turned his dream song into "Yesterday," one of his biggest hits ever.

If you're struggling with personal or career issues, check your dreams to see if a great solution is waiting in the wings. Often all it takes is listening to realize you had the answer all along.

## Tips for Working with Dreams

- *Before going to sleep, state your intention to remember your dreams.* Like priming the pump, this may take a while, but soon your dreams will flow.
- *Try to wake before your alarm goes off.* Nothing erases a dream faster than being startled awake.
- *When you wake from a dream, lie still.* Translate the images into words before opening your eyes.
- *Keep pen and paper beside your bed so you can start writing before the dream fades.*
- *Better yet, keep a dream journal to record your dreams and recurring symbols.* While some images may be universal, your dream language is your own.
- *Don't judge your dreams.* They speak in metaphor, image, and pun. As with any language, it takes time to learn.
- *If you want help, ask for a dream, and then seriously consider its answer.* Often dreams answer the question behind the question.
- *Have the courage to face what your dreams are telling you.* All dreams come for our benefit—even nightmares.
- *Share your dreams.* Working on dreams with others is a great way to learn about dreams. \*



# Cultivating Serenity in Your Life

The serenity prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous says that the key to serenity is accepting what you cannot change, changing what you can, and possessing the wisdom to know the difference. It's a good prayer that covers a lot of ground, but how do you tell the difference between what you can and cannot change? Here are some things over which you do have control.



lives of others. Choose your words carefully and quickly acknowledge any harm.

## Your Beliefs

If you believe that others should take care of your needs, then you will be frustrated when they don't. If you believe things must be a certain way, you'll surely face disappointment.

## Your Values

What's important to you is your choice. No one else should tell you what to value. Spend some time

clarifying your values and then aligning your life with them.

## Your Work

Although complaining about one's job may seem like a national pastime, you do actually get to choose your work in the world. If you don't like yours, take stock and take action.

## Your Actions

No one can "make" you do anything. If you're unhappy with your behavior, change it, make amends if necessary, chart a new course.

## Your Words

Spoken or written, the words you choose impact your life and the

## Your Friends

Those you associate with say a lot about what you think about yourself. You can choose friends who support you or those who bring you down.

## Your Input

You can select your sources of news and entertainment. If you feel adversely affected, turn off the computer, the TV, and/or ignore advertising.

## Your Time

Though it may not always feel this way, you do choose every day how to use its 24 hours.

## Your Basic Health

While you can't control your genetic make-up, you can choose to exercise, sleep enough, eat healthy food, and get routine check-ups.

## Your Legacy

All that you choose while alive—your actions and words—will become the gift you leave when you die. What will be your legacy? \*

*For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 281-268-6304.*

*Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area)*

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