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## Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson



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"There are two kinds of guilt: the kind that drowns you until you're useless, and the kind that fires your soul to purpose." ? Sabaa Tahir, *An Ember in the Ashes*

Anna sobbed in my office as she recounted all the ways she was a defective mother to her three children. Her 16-year-old daughter was cutting her arms and legs and being uncommunicative, her 11-year-old daughter was underperforming in school, and her 9-year-old fourth-grade son was being bullied.

Altogether it was a lot for a single parent to handle. Naturally someone in her situation would be upset and discouraged, and some self-reflection never hurts. But Anna was not personally responsible for every aspect of her children's well-being. Instead of being able to look at all she was doing well on their behalf, she was consumed with guilt. The "shoulds" had taken over: I should be a great mom at all times, my children should have only happy lives, I should be to blame if any of my children experience problems.

Some women start feeling guilty during pregnancy if they stray from following all of their doctor's

recommendations. Then they may have some guilt about the actual birth if it was a C-section or if the baby has an unforeseen health issue. Soon after, there can be guilt over nursing and sleep issues with their baby, or just being too tired to be the spectacular parent they would like to be. Then there's the guilt many parents have if they find themselves resenting their child's constant crying or whining or demands for attention.

Later on, parents can feel guilty if they don't spend enough time with their kids, if the time they spend isn't creative enough and fun for the kids, if they don't take their kids to various activities, if they take their kids to too many activities, if they don't buy their kids what they want at times, if they buy their kids too much at times . . . you name it, and some parents will invariably feel guilty.

A small amount of guilt can be useful in helping to guide us. We may decide to make shifts and changes for the better after we've experienced some pangs of guilt. But experiencing too much guilt frequently leads to unhappiness and discouragement. Ironically, an excess of guilt prevents us from making clear and productive decisions about the issues that are contributing to our guilt in the first place. It hampers our ability to problem-solve effectively.

What to do about this energy-draining and time-sucking emotion? It's not enough to say to yourself, "Just stop feeling guilty." You need to actively convince yourself that it's a form of negative energy that you don't deserve to have. I always tell people that the fact that you have guilt in the first place shows what a caring and responsible person you are. Unfortunately, some parents who need to feel guilt about their parenting, such as those who abuse their children, all too often don't.

Here are some points to consider:

Realize that your children will likely remember the overall loving and fun times together, and not the occasional lapses on your part.

It's good for children to see your imperfections at times, especially if you acknowledge them or can even laugh about them. You can then be a role model for them in accepting certain personal limitations and trying to improve what you can. In this way, your kids will see that you don't expect perfection from yourself or from them, and neither should they.

Realize that your guilt can interfere with your being a relaxed person for your children to be around. Too much guilt creates anxiety and stress.

Look at your feelings of guilt as something to be explored. Think about whether there's a connection with your own childhood and your parents. If a parent caused you pain or disappointment, have you resolved never to do this to your kids? Or if you had a happy childhood, are you feeling you need to do at least as well or even better for your kids?

Look at how much pressure you put on yourself in general and try to reduce some of it. You need to see that you can still perform at a high level (usually, but maybe not always!) without applying a lot of pressure.

If you are struggling, get help for yourself. Sometimes we need someone to help us be able to change our mind set.

As your kids become teens and adults, if they see you feeling exceptionally guilty about yourself as a parent, they may not easily accept responsibility for themselves and their own actions.

Above all, convince yourself that chances are you will not damage your child irreparably if you occasionally don't have patience, energy, time or motivation to give your best to your child.

After receiving support and encouragement, Anna was ready to address her children's issues. Her teenage daughter was diagnosed with clinical depression, and improved significantly with a combination of medication and therapy. There was a history of depression on both sides of the family. We developed strategies to help motivate her 11-year-old in school. This child was a day-dreamer who was resisting having to grow up and face additional responsibilities. Anna worked with her son's school to address the bullying situation, and we discussed ways to help empower him with his peers.

When Anna was able to step back, she realized that it was unproductive and unnecessary to blame herself because her children were struggling. Instead Anna could view each of her children's difficulties as a challenge to overcome, without letting guilt get in the way.

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