



# RECOVERY

# TOOLS FOR

## Getting out of the Guilt Trap Tips for Managing Guilty Feelings

Guilt is a normal feeling that helps us control our behavior. Guilty feelings urge us to apologize when we have hurt another person. The fear of having guilty feelings keeps us from lying, stealing, or doing other socially unacceptable things.

People who don't feel any guilt at all are society's criminals. They think only of themselves and no one else. A little bit of guilt is a good thing. But too much guilt can have a bad affect on us. It can cause us to be afraid, anxious and affect our self-esteem.

When guilty feelings keep you from being happy, you may be in a guilt-trap. If you find that your guilty feelings are causing you problems, you should work to gain control.

Here are some signs that your guilty feelings are causing problems:

- You feel vaguely guilty most of the time, even if you haven't done anything wrong.
- You have strong guilty feelings for doing something minor. For example – you lose sleep over telling a small white lie.

- Others can easily make you feel guilty.
- You personalize your guilt. Instead of saying things like, "I made a mistake," you say, "I am a mistake."
- You feel guilty even about the good things that happen to you.
- You turn your guilty feelings into other feelings such as anger or hate.

Here are some ways to keep guilty feelings from trapping you:

**Understand what you're feeling guilty about.** If you usually feel a little bit guilty, you may want to talk to your therapist or support group about it. You may need to work on understanding your guilty feelings. On the other hand, if you can't find anything to feel guilty about, you might just be able to give up the guilty feelings.

**Take control over what you say to yourself** – When you start saying things to yourself like, "I'm stupid," "I'm Lazy," or "I can't do anything right," stop these sayings immediately. Sometimes we play these messages in

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our heads out of habit. To break the habit, picture a large stop sign in your mind. Once you have concentrated on the stop sign, replace the negative sayings with positive sayings such as, "I am a good person. I make mistakes, but all people do."

**Learn to appreciate your assets and accomplishments.** When you start to feel guilty about being happy or about the good things you have done, change the focus. Focus instead, on all the reasons why you deserve to be happy. Make mental lists of all the good things you've done to deserve happiness.

**Confess if you need to.** If you feel like you have done something terrible, sometimes it helps to talk to someone about it. Talk to your therapist, to your support group, a clergyman or a trusted friend. Getting things off your chest can help ease some of your guilt. Your friends and supporters might also be able to give you some good advice.

**Make an action plan** - Our guilt can make us powerless. When you say things to yourself like, "I'm a bad person," it doesn't allow for action. Instead say something like, "I made a mistake, I'm going to do something to correct it," This gives you some control over your life and life's situations.

**Be kind to yourself.** If you've done something you regret, make amends if possible. Remember - making mistakes is human. Use your mistakes to learn and grow from. Then work on forgiving yourself to become a better person.

### Community Mental Health Centers

Pikes Peak MHC  
719-573-9514

Spanish Peaks MHC  
719-545-2746

San Luis Valley MHC  
719-589-3671

Southeast Mental Health Services  
719-384-5446

West Central MHC  
719-275-2351

Southwest Colorado MHC  
970-259-2162

Midwestern MHC  
970-249-9694

Colorado West MHC  
970-945-2241

Colorado Health Networks believes that people can and do recover from mental illness. That is why we created *Tools for Recovery*. *Tools for Recovery* is a series of tip sheets that are written by and for consumers about issues, opportunities and obstacles people face in their recovery from mental illness. These tip sheets are available through your mental health center or by calling the Access to Care Line at :

**1-800-804-5008**

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