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Strategies for Releasing Guilt **by Lisa Martin, The Working Mother's Coach**

Working moms confide in me that they feel guilty about a number of things – missing their baby's first stumbling steps, putting their children in child care, having their teens come home to an empty house. And these scenarios relate only to their children, not including the guilt that stacks up for taking time for themselves, work commitments, personal relationships and so much more.

When it comes to balancing kids and career, you name the issue and, in all probability, some career-oriented mom out there will feel some shame or blame about it.

Initially, guilt can be a positive force. It is a warning to us that we need to make some changes. However, if we don't heed those warning signs, guilt can quickly manifest itself as anxiety, stress, depression and other harmful emotions and conditions.

If you find guilt weighing you down or want to be as guilt-free as possible, here are three strategies to consider.

1. Determine the source of your guilt

Do your best to discover the source of your guilty feelings. Do they come from you, your children or outsiders who criticize your choices? For example, you are feeling badly about turning down a friend's dinner invitation and discover that the source of that guilt stems from personal programming that you must say yes to each request, otherwise you are a "bad" friend.

Knowing the source of your guilt, now you can release it by acknowledging that saying no does not mean you are not a good friend. Honest communication with your friend about not being up to a party is far better than attending out of obligation and feeling resentful during and afterwards.

2. Adjust your expectations

Guilt can stem from not living your life in accordance with your own personal standards, expectations and values – what you feel is right and important. When there is a gap

between our expectation of self (and our role as mothers) and our reality, guilt is often the result. The wider the gap, the more guilt you feel.

Most working mothers I know have very high expectations of themselves. Take a look at the expectations you are placing on yourself. Assess whether they are realistic at this point in your life. Are you expecting to be able to do all the things you could before you became a parent? Have you adjusted your expectations to align with the ages and stages of your children?

For instance, if you feel guilty about not attending all your children's sporting events, see if your expectation of yourself is to be present at all events. If so, perhaps an adjustment in your expectation is in order. Maybe attending 50 percent of the games is acceptable.

3. Apologize to others and forgive yourself

"Too err is human." Many women carry a long list of things they haven't forgiven themselves for. These items range from "stealing my brother's baseball cards" to "raising my voice at my children," with many stops along the way. With this lack of self-forgiveness comes its partner in crime – guilt.

If you are beating yourself up over things that happened in the past, now is the time to let them go. Write a list of everything you have not forgiven yourself for. Some of these things you may be able to rectify, and some you may not. If you feel rotten about arguing with your child, for example, make a deliberate attempt to give that child a special hug and apologize. Then put the matter to rest. For more complicated issues, find a way, such as writing a letter, making a phone call or simply "letting it go," to bring the issue to some level of resolution.

Too much guilt can weigh you down, making it difficult to move on with your life and maintain a positive outlook. The good news is that there are simple ways to put guilt into perspective and, hopefully, leave it behind. Through self-awareness and conscious choices, we can all "release our guilt" and feel a whole lot lighter without it.

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