

Ep #85: Guilt Guilt Guilt!



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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It's normal and human to F up, to make a mistake, to not do a thing you said you'd do. But for many of us, not measuring up to some internal standard of perfection leads to a spiral of guilt. The kind of guilt that leads us to be unkind to ourselves, to beat ourselves up, and my love, what we get to learn is that what you eat, say, do, don't do that you said you'd do, all of that is just that.

And it's not an indictment of your value, worth, or goodness, my perfect angel. Ready to drop the guilt for good? Keep listening. It's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. Things are great in my world. The leaves are changing colors, I got to watch two chipmunks have like, a wrestle on my porch the other day, which was so cute. They were chasing each other two feet away from me. I was reading a really great book called Digital Minimalism that my amazing friend Andrea Glik sent me.

And I was contemplating the role of social media and all this digital everything in my life when, gosh, I got to get super-duper present because I heard little nails on the deck and I was like, what is it? It was not the wolverine my brain thought it was. It was two squirrels and they were running so fast and so hard it sounded like a herd of elephants.

Seems I've taken to country life pretty well. My six-month masterclass, Overcoming Codependency is also going really well. I am wildly in love with

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everyone in it. And we're doing some beautiful deep work. The next group starts very soon. By the time you've heard this, they'll already have started, which is so amazing. And I'm so excited to meet and connect with these beautiful souls.

If the masterclass is something that you're interested in, we will be doing it again in early 2021. So keep an eye on all my everything and you can be the first to sign up. I'm also starting a waitlist now, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass if you're excited and you're ready to do this deep healing work with me and you want to get on the waitlist today.

Okay, so none of that has anything to do with today's topic, which is guilt. And we are talking about guilt because well, it's ever present. Gosh, it has in my life and in the lives of the people with whom I work. So guilt is an emotion, a feeling, a sensation in your body.

It is a response to believing that you have done something wrong, that you have wronged someone else, or you have failed to do something, or you did it and you really put your foot in it. Nerd alert - don't you love it when we start like, three minutes in with a nerd alert?

In its way, guilt can be a useful thing. A pro-social experience. It helps us to see where we've F'ed up, hurt someone, let someone down by not keeping our word, or acting in our integrity. So we have the opportunity to make amends, to apologize, to make it better.

Evolutionarily, that makes sense. It's a way to make sure you're not kicked out of the village and left to die, you guessed it, cold and alone on the mountainside. Researchers have found that kids as young as two years old feel pro-social guilt. And when they think they've broken an adult's toy, they want to make it better however their two-year-old selves can.

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And when focused inward, I feel guilty because I let me down, guilt can help us to repair harm and take ownership of our own lives. When focused outward, as in I've done something and someone else is telling me they are hurt, we can also take ownership, responsibility for our part in a painful situation of our own creation.

The problem is when we feel guilty about all of the things, or when we can't learn from the experience and then let go of guilt, which is something I hear a lot from my clients and from my friends as well. Definitely something I've experienced. Rolling around in that guilty thought, "I messed it up, I messed it up, I messed it up," for hours or days or even weeks after the experience.

Guilt over things that aren't failings, F ups, actually doing something wrong, but are simply choices that we make is also a very common experience that I see a lot of. For example, I feel guilty for eating that, guilty for drinking that, guilty for not eating what she served because I don't like it, I'm sensitive to it, I'm allergic to it.

Guilt for not going to the gym, guilty for prioritizing going to the gym when I could have hung out with this person who's visiting me, guilty for putting my own needs first, for doing my morning ritual and practices when a new date has slept over and was waiting for me in the other room.

These forms of guilt are not helpful, my beauty. They do not serve you. They don't keep you moving towards making anything better in your life or anyone else's. Guilt is also not helpful when it's about a situation beyond our control, or when it's about emotionally caretaking another person.

When it's based on the belief that our thoughts, words, actions, feelings create an emotional state in someone else. I believed that I had these magical levels of influence and direct impact over others for most of my life. I was taken aback to realize just how paternalistic it is to think that we create someone else's feelings because we just don't.

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You say words, other people interpret them through their own lens and have an emotional reaction based on their own thoughts and experience. That's the think-feel-act cycle we've talked so much about over these many episodes.

So feeling guilty because your words solicited a response is just not helpful. And obviously, if you're a frequent listener to the show, you know I'm not ever talking about abdicating responsibility, particularly for prejudiced or discriminatory speech.

I'm not saying we don't apologize when someone says ouch. We apologize for our impact, regardless of intention, but there's no need for guilt here. What I am talking about are situations like when we say I love your new haircut, and someone says, "I didn't look good before?"

Or when it turns out we aren't mind readers. When we're making choices to protect and love ourselves, or when the action we feel guilty for not taking is actually beyond our human capacity. So for example, I feel so guilty I didn't have a gluten-free option available for her, I didn't know she had celiac.

Or I feel so guilty, I asked how his mom was doing. I didn't know she had gotten sick and died. Or I feel guilty that my friends out west are living with so much smoke in the air and I can't help them in any way. Or I feel guilty about not going to his barbecue, but I know he hasn't been COVID conscious and I just don't want to be around someone who hasn't been wearing a mask, who's been going to bars inside, et cetera.

All of these examples of experiencing this kind of guilt come from thinking we should be doing something, that it's morally superior, better to be doing some specific thing in some specific way, and we tell a guilt story when we don't measure up to our internalized perfectionist thought fantasies for ourselves.

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About how perfectly we should be behaving, thinking, and feeling at all times. Because if you aren't telling the story that it's wrong to not be a perfect hostess who can read minds, it's bad to not know who is living and who is not without being told, it's not loving to be able to clear smoke 3000 miles from your door with your willpower alone, it's selfish to want to protect yourself from COVID, and to protect the vulnerable populations you come in contact with, if you're not having those thoughts about your own shortcomings, then you wouldn't feel that sense of guilt.

I feel guilty wouldn't be your verbal framing if your thoughts about the issue at hand weren't creating that experience for you. I find that humans socialized as women are often trained to have an extra layer of guilt laid over most everything in our lives, particularly taking care of ourselves.

There's that agist old dichotomy in most cultures in which women are damned if we do and damned if we don't, and full of guilt and shame, which is another topic for another day, whichever choice we make. We can feel guilt about wanting sex in a specific way, not wanting it at all, wanting it all the time, or not feeling secure enough or safe enough in our bodies to voice what we want.

We can feel guilt for espousing our viewpoint when someone else don't agree with it. That guilt around making someone feel bad, and then we can also feel guilty for not speaking up. There's mom guilt about putting yourself first, or guilt about putting your children first. Guilt about using plastic or guilt about wasting water washing out your reusable items.

The other day I felt a pang of guilt when I used a plastic takeout cup, but the cafe I was at wouldn't refill the mug I'd brought in because COVID. Guilt for not working out during a global pandemic, guilt about prioritizing your workouts when the world is a dumpster fire.

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Guilt for working on yourself when the world needs you, or guilt for continuing to act from your old patterns when you also aren't getting the support you need to make changes, either because of structural inequalities, or because you feel guilty taking the time and energy and resources to care for you, or because you feel guilty prioritizing or investing in yourself.

I could go on, but I know you get the point. Given the opportunity, we can create a guilt story about just about anything and that's the point. While some guilt is that pro-social driver to be a responsible human in your world, most of the guilt we put ourselves through, it's about things that are so inconsequential, so not about having an appropriate human, loving world, supportive guilt response that leads us to change our behavior for our own and the greater good.

It's just about a story you were taught or wrote in your own mind about what makes a human, once again, particularly those socialized as women, good or bad. What that external barometer of your worth says, what your inner people-pleaser and perfectionist are saying.

For example, I feel guilty for eating those cupcakes because good, read thin, women just don't eat those things, or because gluten is the devil. I feel guilty for not calling them when I really didn't want to talk to them at all. I feel guilty for saying no because I know she wanted me to agree to do that job for her. I feel guilty for charging what my time is worthwhile also giving away so much for free.

I feel guilty for going to the school I want to go when my parents want me to go to this other program. It's often not about doing something wrong in the sense of it being illegal or taboo even. It's about you calling the thing you do or don't do bad. And that statement, that thought in your mind creates the story that guilt is required, necessary, even helpful. But it's not.

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It's just not. That kind of guilt doesn't move your life or anyone's life forward in any way, my sweet little ravioli. If you don't think it's wrong to eat something or not exercise or not set a boundary or not say something or not, you won't feel guilt about it. It's just what you do and what you're doing, not an indictment of your value, goodness, or worth.

I no longer feel guilt about eating what I want to eat because I have done my work and yes, it's ongoing, of course, but the work of just articulating the story, that eating any specific thing is good or bad, that it means anything about me as a human mammal.

I used to feel guilt all the time about putting myself first, about saying yes or not when I meant it if someone else didn't like it. About resting, taking a break, setting a boundary, saying no, calling out prejudice and someone getting upset. And those are the situations in which I surely could be choosing guilt, but I decline. Thank you so much.

Meanwhile, if I break someone else's toy, I would 100% feel that pro-social guilt of having done an oopsie, and I get to take action to attempt to remedy that mistake, to amend and repair and restore the relationship, to clean up my side of the proverbial street.

So different than feeling internal guilt for having skipped my meditation this morning. The former, the pro-social guilt moves us to take useful, skillful action in the world to make our world a better place. The latter, beating yourself up for not accomplishing a goal that you set for yourself, wow, baby, that does nothing good. Nothing good for you, not for anyone in this world.

It just creates more suffering, more anguish, more upset, less trust of self. Remember, you have a thought and that creates a feeling. You take action based on that feeling and create a result for you in your own life. That being mean to yourself guilt does not drive you to take self-loving action, to move

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your life forward in a meaningful and helpful way. It does not create sustainable fuel for living an intentional life, and it's a hot mess for your nervous system.

As you begin to spin on the terrible thing you did and how it means you're just very, very bad, which leads you to beat yourself up. The classic perfectionist and codependent habit and triggers a sympathetic nervous system response, fight or flight, adrenaline, cortisol, revved up, looking for danger, not feeling safe.

Or leads you down the dorsal vagal immobilization response of collapsing inwards as you beat yourself up for simply being a human who does oopsies. We've talked a lot about how lasting change and growth come from meeting yourself with love, care, and understanding. Not from beating you up and being your own judge and jury, criticizing yourself for your choices.

What bears saying very clearly is this; when you recognize that you're telling a story that you need to feel guilty about something, pause, center yourself, ground yourself in your own body, and I'll do that sometimes by putting a hand on my chest, on my heart, and noticing my breath. No need to change it. Just bring your awareness inward.

And then ask yourself, if saying I feel guilty about eating that bagel helps you in any way. Because it likely doesn't. So you get to decide if you want to keep that thought or trade it in for something like I made a choice to eat a bagel, it was delicious. I'm going to pause before making that choice again because in my body, bagels lead to joint pain, brain fog, tummy aches, whatever.

Or if that's not your truth, I made a choice to eat a bagel. It was delicious. End of story. And what you're leaving out of there is all that mental baggage about your worth and your goodness and what someone else

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might be doing in that situation. You made a choice, you ate a bagel, I hope you enjoyed it.

And when the action involves other people, it's still important to stop and ask yourself, is feeling guilt about this helping me or others? Do I need to do something to repair the harm here? Feeling guilty doesn't help you, and it sure doesn't help the person you may have harmed.

I'm talking actual harm here. Not the stories you tell yourself about meeting impossible perfectionist standards to be all things to all people. But my point is guilt may be a useful flag. So take time to notice it. Raise your awareness about it. Accept that you're feeling it, and then you can take action to ask yourself, is this pro-social guilt or is this my old habit of beating me up?

But baby, staying there, stewing in guilt, once again does not improve anything for anyone. What I want to strongly recommend against is beating yourself up for having the guilt thought, and we talked about this back in episode 61. The episode about looking at our internal racist biases.

When you guilt yourself for having a thought, you don't want to have, it's like a doubling down in your brain. Layering bad feelings on bad feelings. And that process both keeps you from making change from under that pile of guilt and can also be a buffer, which we talked about in episode 14.

The guilt can be a way to distract your brain from the original choice you made by focusing on the guilt about having guilt. Oh brains, fascinating, right? So you get to pause when you hear your brain telling a guilt story and to ask yourself if it serves you.

If it's pro-social, if you did something you'd like to apologize for or put right, and if you want more support around that, I did a whole miniseries about apologies. Go give that a listen. Or you can check in to see if you're

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spinning in self-recrimination and being mean to you because that's your habit.

Getting clear on your internal motivation for thinking a guilt thought can help you decide if you want to keep it or not. Alright my beauties, that's it for today. I hope this was helpful. If you're loving the show, I would be so grateful if you could head on over to Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your shows, subscribe, rate, and review. It helps others to find the show more easily.

And if you've already done that, thank you so much. And I'd be grateful if you could share it on your social medias, which is funny because I started this show talking about being on the socials less, but here we are. And make sure to tag me, @victoriaalbinawellness so I can share it on my story and send you a big thank you and my free meditations, if you don't already have them.

Alright my beauties, let's do what we do. Bring your attention to your breath, notice it, check in with yourself. Get present here. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well. I'll talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.