



Reframing Codependent Guilt

Codependents suffer from guilt because they have unrealistically high expectations for themselves, are people-pleasers and worry about what others think of them, are sensitive to criticism, and are afraid of conflict and rejection. Much of this guilt is inappropriate; they feel bad about things they didn't do, couldn't control, or that weren't their responsibility.

Appropriate guilt – feeling bad when you did something wrong – can help you to learn and do better when it accompanies self-forgiveness. But, when your guilt is based on unrealistic expectations, perfectionist ideals, distorted thoughts, and fear, it isn't helpful. It deteriorates self-esteem and can contribute to anger, self-criticism, worry, difficulty setting boundaries, and practicing self-care.

To reduce inappropriate guilt, you have to change your thinking. You have to believe that you don't have to be perfect and please everyone, you're not responsible for what other people do or what's not in your control, and it's OK to make your own choices and do what's best for you.

The following reflective questions or journal prompts can help you gain insight about your guilt, determine if it's accurate, and set more realistic expectations for yourself. For this exercise, choose just one thing you feel guilty about and answer the questions based on that situation. You can repeat the exercise later with other situations, if you like.

What do you feel guilty about?

What does guilt prevent you from doing? (Setting boundaries, practicing self-care, speaking up for yourself, feeling good about yourself, etc.)

How does this negatively impact you?

Guilt is based on a belief that you're doing something wrong. What specifically do you think you're doing wrong?

Now, you want to determine if this is appropriate guilt (you actually did something wrong) or inappropriate guilt (based on unrealistic expectations, distorted thoughts, other people's ideas about how you should behave).

How do others expect you to behave in this situation?

Do you agree with these expectations?

How do you think you should act in this situation?



Who gets to decide what's right for you?

What will happen if you aren't perfect or don't live up to your expectations?

How can you modify your expectations so they reflect what's truly important to you?

Do you recognize any distorted thoughts fueling your guilt? What are they? (You can download a list of cognitive distortions from the Resource Library.)



Do you think it would be wrong for a friend to do whatever you feel guilty about? Why or why not?

Beating yourself up isn't helpful and doesn't tend to promote learning and changing. Self-compassion is acknowledging when you're suffering and giving yourself loving-kindness and is a much more productive response to guilt.

What can you do or say to yourself to offer yourself comfort and compassion?