



# G UNDERSTANDING GUILT: CAUSE AND EFFECTS

Guilt is the emotion we feel when we think we've done something we're not supposed to do, or haven't done something we should have. It's an emotion we've experienced since early in our lives. If you've ever seen the look on a child's face when he or she feels guilty, you can understand what a basic and natural emotion it is. The child's eyes are downcast and avoid you. The child feels bad. These tips will help you understand what guilt is, why it's useful in some situations and why habitual guilt can be destructive.

## GUILT HELPS FORM US

Guilt is a bad feeling and an effective teacher. As children, most of us felt guilty when we misbehaved. We wanted to avoid that bad feeling, so most of us learned to follow the rules set out for us. That's one of the ways our behavior was shaped. In this way, guilt plays a part in learning right from wrong.

## HABITUAL GUILT

As adults, we still have to follow the rules. Many of these laws, such as traffic laws, are imposed for personal safety. Some rules, however, become inappropriate for adults and we get stuck in a childish habit because we feel guilty if we do something different.

For example, many of us grew up with our parents telling us that we had to finish all of the food on our dinner plate. Our parents played on our childish guilt by reminding us of all the starving children who didn't have dinner. So we ate what we didn't like and we ate when we were no longer hungry. Stated simply, we learned to eat so that we wouldn't feel guilty. As a result, many adults are in the habit of eating every bite of food on their dinner plate, whether they're still hungry. Guilt has shaped the habit.

## OVERCOMING HABITUAL GUILT

You can overcome habitual guilt by examining the guilt-making situation the next time it occurs. Do you feel guilty because you're sorry you did something? Or is the guilty feeling a result of habit? Adults have the right and the responsibility to make their own decisions. By analyzing the situations that cause you to feel guilty, you might be able to eliminate some unnecessary bad feelings from your emotional responses.

*Begin to change your habit of feeling guilty by examining how you feel in situations that trigger such childhood memories as being scolded for breaking or spilling.*

