



# Not Guilty

September 2017

**Emma Heaney-Yeatts (BA Hons, BCouns., MNZAC)**

Lead Counsellor and Extension Manager, Post and Antenatal Distress Wellington Support Inc.

## Parenting guilt

---

Do you ever feel like parenting is one long guilt trip? It's something we never expected when we embarked on our parenting journey, something that no-one ever warned us about, something that can be such a struggle to deal with, yet something no-one really talks about.

This article looks at parenting guilt, the forms in which it comes and what we can do when we feel all consumed by it. This article is formulated primarily based on my knowledge and opinion, and the learnings I've acquire from working with my clients over the years.

## Kinds of guilt

---

### My mistake vs My fault

Feeling guilt is useful if we can see it for what it is - a boo boo that we feel bad about; a not-so-good outcome we weren't expecting; an accident we can put right. Feeling guilt can help us realise that we may need to address a situation that has gone awry and take steps to prevent similar situations occurring in future. This guilt is useful and constructive - it helps us do things differently and remedy tricky situations. We can see what we did as a mistake, rather than a fault in our being.

By giving ourselves compassion and understanding, instead of blame, we are more likely to get through tough times unscathed. It helps when we can see that there may be reasons why we did what we did - i.e. we were hurting and/or unskilled/unknowledgeable/in the wrong place at the time. For my clients who blame themselves for not having enjoyed their baby in the early months, it can help to look at the bigger picture at the time; i.e. lack of support, unskilled in adapting/letting go of control, societal/social pressure, difficult living situation. Mums can then often come to the conclusion that they weren't at fault, and in fact did their best in difficult circumstances. It can be hard at the time to accept that we may not be coping with a situation as well as we thought we would. This can be a real learning curve, to know when to pull back and adapt i.e. knowing when you've tried your best, asking for help, changing living situations. This is a learning curve and it's hard work, but it helps us build resilience.

When tackling a new challenge, like having a baby, ideally we are Ready (it's a priority right now), Willing (it's important to you), and Able (have the skills). But we can only make our best decision with the information we have at the time, and in reality we may discover things are quite different to what we expected. This is not our fault. Doing our best is good enough because it's all we can do in the moment we have - and sometimes this might involve mistakes. When we can see things as 'My Mistake' rather than 'My Fault', this can help us release ourselves from destructive guilt that is damaging to the core. However, if making a mistake feels like it's triggering something deeper, sometimes this can indicate a deeper wound in us, from childhood, for which we still carry guilt.

## I'm Bad vs I'm Good Enough

Guilt is not great if we attribute it to a lacking in our inner self - 'I'm faulty' or 'I'm Bad' or 'I'm a failure'. Most of the time we are not aware that our thoughts go that deep, we are so used to reacting in certain ways when we are emotionally triggered that we don't stop and think 'What might be going on for me here?' or 'What's going on underneath my anger and frustration?'. When we stop and consider what might really be going on for us, this can often uncover deeply ingrained beliefs about ourselves that go way far back into childhood - yet subconsciously these thoughts stick with us into adulthood.

In childhood the beliefs might have served a purpose - i.e. to keep us safe. For example a child who doesn't receive any physical affection from their caregivers might start to believe they are not loveable and therefore stop reaching out for affection to protect themselves from the rejection. This can prevent them from reaching out for love and affection throughout their lives. Often it takes a big life-changing event, like becoming a parent, for some of these 'survival' beliefs and behaviours to not work for us anymore.

In contrast, our positive self-beliefs promote more constructive behaviours. For example if we believe that 'I'm good enough, I can make mistakes' and 'I'm doing my best right now, and that's good enough' it's more likely that we won't be consumed by debilitating guilt or fear of making mistakes/feel regretful, but rather we might be braver, more willing to take risks and more confident we can handle any outcomes. Also if we have the belief that 'I'm good enough, despite the mistakes I've been subjected to by others' it may mean we can let go of past hurts and be able to detach ourselves from any blame we've taken upon ourselves when it's been another person's mistake.

For every negative belief, there is a positive alternative, therefore for every reactive or destructive behaviour there is an alternate positive version. The first step to adopting more constructive beliefs, and in turn behaviours, is to open ourselves up to the possibility to uncovering our reality that may be buried deep inside and unwilling or too afraid to come out.

## Real guilt vs False guilt

Guilt is not great if it's being enforced on us by others, or we perceive it is. If we feel like people are blaming us, it can affect us more if we also believe we are to blame. If we believe we are bad then we fear being blamed (by ourselves or others) because it feels so painful, even hopeless. So we might do all we can to appease others, or we may even fight back and defend ourselves - anything to avoid feeling bad. We might then tread on our own selves for the benefit of others. We lose confidence.

This type of guilt can make us feel a prisoner in our own selves. We start to question our own thoughts, judgement, decisions. We feel like we can't trust ourselves anymore. We think we don't know what is 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad', or what is important to us - and we might favour

other's opinions of what's 'right'. This sort of guilt is destructive because if we fear blame based on an imaginary rule book, we inevitably will behave in ways that sabotage our own self. This is 'False Guilt', it's imaginary but it feels really real, and it gets in the way of our living. In reality there is no one rule book for everyone, the only real guarantee is how we feel about something based on what we see as important.

Real guilt can be helpful, it can be an indicator that we've stepped on our own values or gone beyond our own boundaries. It's important to know what is important to us, so that we can live life in line with this. This is called 'Living our Valued Life', it gives us a sense of self-assurance, self-confidence, direction and value in the world. Along with this is the self-belief that 'I can be trusted'. In addition to living our own valued life we also need to abide by some ways of living that are enforced. In the society we live we are bound by certain rules and laws, and many of them make a lot of sense in order to keep people safe and respected. But most of us would find that these make sense to us, and align with our values anyway.

## What helps to combat guilt

---

As mentioned above, the first and most important step to combatting guilt is to bring our feelings, thoughts and behaviours to our attention. This may require some coaching/counselling to help you to acquire these new skills and help you along your way. It can be very scary looking at where the 'fuel to our fire' might be coming from. Many people think that by opening up old wounds that it's like 'opening a can of worms' and it will make things worse. One thing to ask yourself is 'Does the possibility of feeling better about myself and my life feel like it's worth a shot?'. There's no illusions though, therapy is hard work so again you need to be Ready (your lifestyle allows time to work on yourself), Willing (it's really important to you to feel better about yourself and others), and Able (some coping skills, external support).

There are some therapies that are particularly effective for dealing with the kinds of guilt mentioned above. The main thing, however, is that you feel there's a good fit between you and your therapist, this might mean looking at counsellor profiles on places like NZAC (find a counsellor), or Talking Works, or on PND Wellington's website under low-cost counselling.

### Acceptance and Commitment Therapy/Mindfulness

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) centred on Mindfulness concepts, which are about noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations, and not being afraid of them. This therapy is good for combatting issues with 'false' guilt and attribution of fault. There are several cartoon videos on YouTube about ACT, one in particular called 'Demons on the Boat', which is about not letting fears get in the way of living your life. ACT promotes living a 'valued life', which is about knowing what is important to you e.g. physical health, loving relationships, a sense of achievement, peacefulness, and doing things that align with these. In my work with clients, I use this model alongside the Māori health model Te Whare Tapa Whā, which again is about balancing the elements of life that are important for strength and stability (Tinana, Hinengaro, Wairua, Whānau, and our Whare).

There are also lots of places to learn more about Mindfulness, which again is about letting go of thoughts, emotions and sensations we don't need to hold on to right now. There is a lot of focus on the breath and stillness to facilitate this process. A lot of these practices are used in other therapies as forms of resourcing before embarking on any in-depth therapeutic process. One element of this is visualisation practise where, with the breath, we visualise letting go of the things we can't control.

## Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy

EMDR therapy helps neutralise painful memories so that they don't affect your living. An EMDR therapist helps facilitate the movement of your eyes to access and reprocess those memories. This process, which is physiologically reminiscent of Rapid Eye Movement sleep (except you're awake), helps to uncover where your fears and triggers might be originating from. EMDR therapists help you to reprocess not-so-nice memories from the past, that have been triggered in the present, e.g in your pregnancy, birth, or parenting experience. Which means you become less triggered, more able to behave appropriately, and less afraid of triggers occurring. EMDR is good for guilt coming from a deeper beliefs about not being 'good enough' or being 'bad'.

EMDR is a structured therapeutic process and requires time and commitment and the right conditions, as it can be very tiring letting your brain do all the work. It's not for everyone, for example it's not recommended in 1st and 3rd trimester pregnancy, but the therapist will help assess your suitability. There's often not a lot of talking, which can be good for people who find using words very difficult for painful memories. There is also a good focus on the body, and sensations that the body is holding on to from past trauma. EMDR also has parallels with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, because there is a lot of work on negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive thoughts and behaviours.

## Interactive Drawing Therapy (IDT)

IDT is also a fantastic therapy, which is a really gentle way to uncover what might be fuelling how you are feeling and behaving. This therapy is good for combatting issues with 'false' guilt and attribution of fault, but also with deeper beliefs like 'I'm bad' too. The therapist works with whatever stage in your processing that you are at - you might be right at the beginning and reluctant to venture forward, or you may be pondering some new ways of being. There is also a powerful 'farewells' process used in IDT, which can be great at letting go of old beliefs or attachments with others that aren't serving a good purpose anymore.

## IMAGO Relationship Therapy

IMAGO therapy has parallels with EMDR in that it also looks at childhood wounds and the emotions and behaviours we bring into our lives and our intimate relationships as a result. Our partners are often in the position of triggering our old wounds, but also best placed to help us heal from those wounds. Relationship therapy is hard work but has the added bonus of essentially creating your own in-house therapist! IMAGO is more of a coaching technique - where you and your partner do the work in order to improve understanding, empathy, and communication in your intimate relationship. You also learn how you can help each other be less triggered, because of the deeper understanding you have of one another.

## What next?

---

I'm Emma Heaney-Yeatts, the Lead Counsellor at PND Wellington. I have two young boys and my own experience with postnatal distress. I'm a qualified counsellor and full member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors.

If you want impartial, confidential and professional support while you negotiate your parenting journey then PND Wellington has Counsellors to help. Couples counselling (where it relates to PND) is also available. Our fees range from free to low-cost depending on the level of experience of the Counsellor. On our website you can access a description of the Counsellors we have, their

locations and fees - so you can find a counsellor that fits. See [www.pnd.org.nz](http://www.pnd.org.nz) under 'Get help', 'Low cost counselling'.

PND Wellington produces it's Purple Book, which contains more information about PND and the signs, symptoms and contributing factors. Contact us below if you want copies.

Phone: 04 4723135 (just leave a message and we will call you back).

Email: [pnd.wellington@gmail.com](mailto:pnd.wellington@gmail.com) or [emma.pnd.wellington@gmail.com](mailto:emma.pnd.wellington@gmail.com)

Facebook - search PND Wellington Support and ask to join (secret group).

The content in this article is not intended to replace any medical advice. If you are feeling unsafe then seek emergency help immediately.

## Further information

---

IMAGO Relationship Therapy - <http://www.relationships.co.nz>

EMDR - <http://www.emdr.org.nz>

IDT - <http://www.interactivedrawingtherapy.co.nz>