



## THE GUILT TRAP

For several years her mother had lived in a nursing home. The home was near her house and since she cared for her mother, she visited everyday. These daily visits continued even after the mother lay in a coma. Nothing could be done for the mother. The mother had no idea the visits were taking place, but her daughter went everyday.

On Christmas morning she was busy with opening presents, entertaining family, preparing Christmas dinner, and getting ready to entertain out-of-town guests. The time slipped away, and she missed the visit. That day her mother died. The death was a peaceful passage, long awaited and possibly overdue. Had the lady visited her mother that morning, she would not have noticed any change in her condition. Had she been there when the mother died, there would not have been anything to be done – no help to give, no conscious comfort to administer.

When this woman finally told me her story, she wept as if the event had happened yesterday. Her mother had been dead ten years, but the guilt remained fresh and active.

Anytime a death occurs there will be guilt. If there is none, then we will create it. We just feel the need to feel guilty. We play the game of “if only.” “If only” is played when we begin to list all the things we should have done - “if only I had been there,” “if only I had called a doctor,” or “if only I had been nicer.” These are just some of the statements used in the game of “if only.” The “if only” is always aimed at us. The game is designed to make us feel a weight of guilt to go along with the weight of grief.

Death is not the only reason we feel guilt. When we make the nursing home decision for a loved one, we will feel guilt, create guilt, or let someone put a guilt trip on us. Some guilt is normal and natural. The normal and natural will pass as we adjust to the decision. The thing to avoid is the abnormal and unnatural guilt trips we create or we allow others to put on us.

There is a pattern to these guilt traps we get ourselves caught in. In the case of this woman’s ten-year struggle with created guilt, four statements sum up the pattern;

1. This was not the first time that the daughter had felt guilty about some part of her relationship with her mother. When someone is trapped as this daughter was, there is a lifelong pattern of guilt in her past.
2. Guilt is rarely ever logical. The best traps are the most illogical ones.
3. Not the entire trap came from the mother. A great deal of it came from turning her anger inward to focus on herself.
4. Guilt is never constructive. Ten years of guilt created nothing except misery. No one was helped. Nothing was changed. No one was better off.



A great deal of the counseling I do is aimed at helping people handle guilt. Most of this guilt related to parents. No one can lay guilt on us quite like our parents. No guilt is longer lasting or more devastating than the guilt we grow up with.

If we are faced with the care decision, we are going to be faced with guilt. We must deal with guilt. If it is not dealt with effectively, it can be devastating to us. If it is not conquered, we will find ourselves the victims of a new guilt trip every time we visit.

People who use guilt to get their way, to get attention, or to create misery seem to become addicted to the use of it. As long as it works, they will continue to use it. When it no longer works, they will react. The first reaction will be to redouble their efforts at creating guilt. If this does not work, they will try anger. If anger does not work, they will try martyrdom and depression. If none of these works, they're forced to give it up and adjust. The only way the guilt trap can be sprung is for it to quit working. We alone can make it stop. No one can lay guilt on us without our permission. It takes two to create a guilt trip – one who wants to give it and one who is willing to receive it.

Not all parents in a nursing home will use guilt. Most will use it, and most will be successful. Children already feel a sense of frustration, fear, and failure. They already feel as if they have rejected parents by placing them in a nursing home. This makes children ready for guilt trips and guilt traps. It is a rare person who will not use guilt when they have such ready and willing victims.

The guilt will be subtly applied. It is rarely ever presented in a frontal attack. It is applied with hints or unhappiness or pity or stories about how their parents did not have to go to such a place. It can be applied with sugar-sweet kindness – a sort of "I am miserable, but I understand and still love you" kind of stance.

When we react with guilt, we are trapped. It works. It gets attention. It makes us feel miserable. It ensures regular visits; it manipulates us into being angry at the nursing home. It keeps us under control of someone.

Control is the basic idea behind guilt trips. People use guilt to keep control. As long as we feel guilty, we are under their command. Parents have used this tool for years. Why should they stop now? They won't stop as long as it works.

Knowing this will not make the guilt go away. It will help some folks deal with it in a new way, but there will be others who must go deeper into the problem to find a cure. Some folks have a deeper pattern of guilt than others. These people will have the greatest struggle. These are the ones who need to discover:



## THE PATTERNS OF GUILT

When we are born, the doctor cuts the cord and sets us free from our mother. He cuts the physical cord. The emotional cord must also be cut. Only the child can cut this cord. There comes a time when we must pull away from our parents emotionally if we are to be whole people – a time when we stop living our lives to please them, a time when we say, “This is me, and you must either accept me as I am or reject me, but I must be me.”

The cutting of the cord is a natural process, which begins in the teenage years and should be completed by the time we are adults. Sometimes this is an easy and natural process. Sometimes this cutting is encouraged and welcomed by parents. When this is so, we cut away gradually and with their blessing.

Sometimes it is never done, with disastrous results. It is sad to see grown and married people still desperate for the approval of their parents. It is sad to see them constantly striving for a blessing that will never come. If the blessing is given, then control is lost. Since the issue is control, the blessing will never come.

I had sat with forty-five-year-old men who shared the agony of a father who never told them he loved them. I have watched the tears of fifty-year-old women who had broken their backs trying to please their mothers, only to be rebuffed again and again.

These are the people who have never found the freedom to be themselves. These are the ones who are on a constant guilt trip. These are the ones who are trapped. I send these folks back to confront their parents. This is always painful and often is not successful. Whether successful or not, these children have at least begun the process of cutting the cords. This process is long overdue. Since it is overdue, it is a much bigger problem than it was done sooner. They have years of patterning and anger built-up. The build up is hard to break through.

The folks who had never cut the cords are the ones who will have the greatest struggle with the guilt of the nursing home decision. They are the ones who have performed all their lives and have struggled all their lives with the cord yet uncut. Now they have made an unpopular decision. This may be the first time they have ever crossed their parents. This may be the first time they have not performed on cue. It is easy to see their dilemma. It is also easy to see their guilt.

In many homes there will be one child who has not cut the cords while the other children have done so long ago. The child who has not cut loose is usually the unblessed child. The unblessed child syndrome occurs in a majority of homes. There is one child who, for some reason, is just not the favourite. This is the odd child. This may be the child who is most like the parents, and they see their own faults in the child. Some unblessed children rebel and leave. May redouble



their efforts to please. They perform for love. When they perform, they become victims of the "no blessing equals control" pattern. As long as they are desperate for the blessing, they are controllable. Since control is the game, the blessing can never be given and the child chases a carrot on a stick for the rest of their lives. The other children go on with their lives and are accepted. The child performs and is not accepted.

Almost invariably, this is the child who will be left with the care of the parents. The other children may put it on this child, or this child may just assume the responsibility. When the care decision comes, it is usually this one who makes it. It is also this one who is most susceptible to the guilt.

The struggle with guilt can be deep indeed. It can be very deep for those who have never cut the cord. The cutting is late, they have performed for love, and they are often the unblessed children. The hope is that late or not, these people can confront their parents, declare their independence, and begin the process of breaking free. This will not be easy nor fast nor pleasant, but it will mean they begin to live whole lives. It is about time that they did.

### **THE INTERNALIZING OF GUILT**

Sometimes guilt does not come from an external source. Sometimes we lay it on ourselves. Often when people play the game of "if only," they are internalizing their own anger. Anger must focus somewhere. If we do not feel free to be angry externally, we can focus anger on ourselves.

The frustration of the decision, the sense of failure, the feeling of having rejected a parent, and the hurt of the move are all the same emotion as anger. We will have these emotions. If we cannot verbalize them, they may well turn inside. When they turn inside, we begin to feel guilt.

The woman whose mother died on Christmas morning was a victim of internalized guilt. She experienced grief and hurt when her mother died. The grief and hurt quite naturally produced anger. The anger did not seem proper to her, so she could not express it. Her anger focused on herself, and she built up a great case of "if only."

This was not logical, but guilt is rarely logical. The more illogical guilt is, the harder it hits. She spent ten years being miserable with illogical guilt.

We must accept the grief, hurt, and anger as natural results of what we are experiencing. Verbalize it. Shout it out. Tell someone, no matter how silly it sounds or how illogical it is. I had rather be silly any day than spend my life with internalized anger creating the "if only's."