

# How to Let Go of Guilt to Boost Your Leadership

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Published on [www.lorman.com](http://www.lorman.com) - November 2019

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# How To Let Go Of Guilt To Boost Your Leadership

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You had to make a controversial leadership decision that wasn't embraced across the boards.

You haven't returned your friend's text asking to make a plan because you've had so much work to do.

You had that perfect meal plan set up but instead you're asking the deli to microwave some eggs for you because you don't have time (something I've done).

You were going to go to the gym but the emails kept pouring in like cockroaches.

Whatever the event, life often throws us curve balls that thwart our plans. When this happens, a common result is guilt.

While we can't avoid feeling guilt at times, we can be careful about letting ourselves fall down the rabbit hole.

For leaders, it's important to acknowledge the feeling of guilt but not let it envelop you because ...



## **GUILT AFFECTS YOUR EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING**

If you were to allow your guilt and its corresponding stress to spiral out of control you can risk negatively affecting your prefrontal cognitive abilities, like effective decision-making.

Assigning a word to what you are feeling, such as “pressure,” “guilt,” or “worry,” can activate the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functioning skills.

One way to steer your brain off the guilt track is to create space between you and the overriding emotion.

When you feel guilt coming on, try to recognize it, acknowledge it, and take a step back.

Look at the guilt as an objective observer, rather than the one who is at the center of it. When you distance yourself from the guilt, you lessen its effect.

It’s the difference between being a passenger on a train and stepping off the train to watch it go by, the latter being the objective observer.

In general, when negative emotions creep up, recognize them, acknowledge them, look for the message they are trying to impart, and then let them pass by.

You will find that you are able to get on with things much quicker. Your mental health will be less negatively impaired than if you had let yourself travel down the guilt highway.

You need to protect your prefrontal cortex and its management of your executive functioning skills when in a leadership position because ...

## **GUILT CAN PARALYZE YOU**

Guilt can be a powerful motivator, encouraging us to whip our behaviors into shape. On the flip side, it can also paralyze, steal our focus, and zap our mental energy.

Guilt is related to preserving your own ego and the image that you want to maintain. This all spells C-O-N-T-R-O-L.

Letting go of the need to control is easier said than done. It requires acceptance for outcomes that may not please you. If you feel like a decision you have made might - or has - upset someone, try to accept it.

The sooner you realize you can't control external events the happier you'll be; also, the sooner you'll be able to move on with your life.

Try to accept a reality that may not be your desired one. Life is messy. Making mistakes is part of being human.

## **ACT: MAKE A DECISION TO LESSEN THE GUILT**

Guilt is an indicator that you feel bad about a decision you have made (or not made as the case may be). To free yourself from being mentally and emotionally paralyzed, try to make a decision about the issue at hand.

It doesn't have to be an all-encompassing solution. It may be a temporary band-aid that bides you some time. Taking action to some extent to resolve the matter will help loosen the guilt shackles.

You can't reverse your words or actions (even if the action itself was inaction at a crucial time) but you can forgive yourself, accept the mistake as part of your personal growth, and ...

### **PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION**

When you are in a work crunch and you find that some things in your life are falling by the wayside, *practice self-compassion*.

Beating yourself up for letting things slip at the office or at home can make the stress worse.

Have self-compassion instead: accept that you're in an acute period of work stress and notice — don't suppress or deny — your emotions.

Assess your to-do list by deciding what you need to get done each day and what can wait. And don't be afraid to ask for help, whether it's renegotiating a deadline with a colleague or getting family members to pitch in at home.

Having compassion for yourself will help you increase your focus and get through the crunch with greater ease and peace. In fact ...

### **SELF-COMPASSION IS AN ACT OF BRAVERY**

This all goes back to mindsets. I feel like I'm promoting growth mindset ad nauseum lately, but I don't think it can be said enough.

If you have a fixed mindset, you will make value judgments about your character and personality, presuming them immutable. You will feel incapable of righting the wrong and changing your future behavior.

This is delusional.

Recognize "every move you make, every breath you take, every bond you break" - (sorry, I'm a child of the '80s) - is part of your personal growth.

You weren't born perfect, you're not going to die perfect. If you have the good fortune to experience what feels like a perfect moment in life where all things converge effortlessly, recognize that a million "mistakes" went into making it happen in that way, at that time.

When you realize that all of your mistakes, misjudgments, miscalculations, ill-fated decisions, and poor assessments are crucial ingredients of your blissful moments, it can transform the way you view the so-called negative events and emotions in your life.

Rather than elements of destruction, they now become elements that propel you forward.

## **LASTLY, SOMETIMES THE DEVIL HAS WISDOM ...**

*"Guilt is like a bag of @\$%&\* bricks.*

*All ya gotta do is set it down."*

I've always loved the above analogy that Al Pacino's character, John Gibson (aka the devil), gives in the movie, *Devil's Advocate*, for releasing guilt.

Granted, I wish it weren't the devil pleading a case for doing something immoral, but it's not a bad image.

Imagine your guilt as a heavy briefcase and then throw it, or set it down somewhere and walk away.



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