

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality

The Guilt Monster

Barely able to swallow another bite, 35-year-old Stephanie forces herself to clean her plate.

Sean berates himself constantly, because he can't quit smoking.

Janis spends hours on the phone with her elderly mother despite her full schedule.

These people have something in common: They're slaves to guilt. Wisdom and compassion don't direct their lives—guilt does. At its healthiest, guilt is a worthy emotion that serves as a moral compass. But guilt becomes a poison when it's irrational or self-condemning. Call it a conscience gone wild.

So Stephanie is overweight but feels guilty if she doesn't finish her meals. Instead of listening to her better judgment, she follows the dictates of her early programming.

"I was told it was wrong to waste food," she said in our counseling session.

One solution to conquering unhealthy guilt is to outthink it—attack it with logic. So I explained to Stephanie that if we eat more than our capacity, we inevitably waste food. That's because the food our body doesn't immediately need is stored as extra pounds.

I continued: "Your parents meant well when they taught you to clean your plate, but they needed to advise you to listen to your body first and foremost. In other words, fullness should dictate how much we eat—not guilt." Stephanie can't change the past, but she can reprogram herself by replacing imperfect messages with wiser messages.

Another way to disarm guilt is to outlove it. This isn't terribly hard, because the guilt voice inside us lacks compassion. The people I see with guilt problems usually have an abundance of compassion. But mostly for those around them. With some tweaking they can become just as tenderhearted and forgiving of themselves as they are with others.

That's been Sean's goal in therapy. The belittling effect of guilt undermines his capacity to take charge of himself and finally quit smoking. Not only does self-loathing paralyze his self confidence and belief in himself, it fuels his feelings of inadequacy.

I knew he was making progress when he revealed his epiphany. He said: "Torturing myself is so ludicrous, because it isn't making me stop. The basis of my problem is beating myself up."

Busy Janis needs to learn how to be self-compassionate, too.

She promised her dad—before he died—that she would take care of her mom. To Janis, this means being there for her mom 100 percent. So if her mother calls—anytime of the day or night—she feels obligated to spend time on the phone.

Janis' self-sacrificing may pacify her guilt—keeping the guilt monster happy—but she's far from happy. She's becoming increasingly impatient and short with her mother. The result: more guilt.

"What can I do?" she asked tearfully.

I replied: "Taking care of your mother involves some sacrifice, yes, but it shouldn't be at the detriment of your well-being. I'm certain your father didn't intend for you to abandon yourself. You have a life, too."

Balance is called for. When we give away too much of ourselves, our bodies let us know in the form of fatigue, resentment, and joylessness. Like an achy back, we're supposed to heed those symptoms and pick up lighter loads.

"Janis," I said, "don't forget to pursue the things that brighten your life. Besides, if you're depleted, you're not there for your mother in the right way. It's a matter of quality, not quantity. Your mother wants you to be glad to talk to her, and that's impossible if you're riddled with resentment."

Janis could devise a structure that would include set times for their conversations. Or, she could assert herself on the spot by saying: "Hey, Mom, I'm sorry, I'm busy right now, but can I call you back when I get home from work at 6:30? I want to be able to concentrate on what you're telling me and I have a million things going on right now."

This gives her mother something to look forward to and establishes a time frame they can work with. And if her mother understands Janis' stress, she'll be less likely to take it personally.

Some relief might be felt, too. As it is, Janis' mom probably senses the annoyance in her daughter, which merely enhances her neediness. I assured Janis that she won't be abandoning her mother.

"If you're fully present and fresh," I said, "your mom will probably feel less abandoned than she does now, because now you're simply enduring the conversations."

Our conscience is malfunctioning when it interferes with sound judgment and is toxic to our well-being. Anytime we beat ourselves up mentally, that's abuse. And if it's wrong to be abusive to others, then why is it okay to be abusive to ourselves?