

Give Mommy Guilt a Time Out
By Diane Paddison
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I'm not a perfect mother, and neither are you—let's battle the guilt together.

If you're a working mom like me, I can tell you a few things about yourself.

First, you're tired.

I know.

Me too! I always thought this would get better at each stage of my kids' lives—that somehow once they got "just a little older," I wouldn't worry about them as much, or I'd sleep a little bit more. But so far, no such luck. The kind of energy and effort required definitely changes with each new stage, but somehow my amount of energy seems to stay the same. All my kids are out of high school now, but I'm still a working mom, and I still lose sleep over them. Maybe it'll get better, though, when they get a little older . . . I'll keep you posted.

The second thing I know about you is that you're feeling guilty.

You feel guilty dropping your kids off at day care (especially once they reach the age where they beg you to stay). You feel guilty when you arrive at work a little later than your co-workers, and you feel guilty when you leave earlier than them. You feel guilty at church when you don't sign up for the Thursday morning Bible Study.

I know many women who assume "mommy guilt" is a way of life. Even (and in some cases especially) my Christian friends accept this extreme burden of guilt, shame, and self doubt as part of the universal motherhood experience. Something crazy starts to happen when you accept it as such. You stop fighting the guilt. It's no longer a problem. Instead, it becomes a sort of badge of honor that unites you with other moms. Now, in this upside down reality, it becomes a sign of how much you love your kids and how much you're willing to suffer for them.

What a terrible, ugly lie.

You do not have to feel miserable to be a good mom.

What if I told you there's another way?

That, in fact, mommy guilt is not universal. It's not your burden to bear. You do not have to feel this way.

We can fight mommy guilt. And we not only can—but we must.

It starts by recognizing this kind of guilt is not healthy, and is certainly not inevitable. In France, for example, American expatriates report that working French moms don't seem to suffer the same kind of guilt about their decisions. Just like Americans, they leave their kids in day care. They work all day, and cook dinner afterwards. They feel overstretched and sometimes inadequate, but, according to author Pamela Druckerman, they "refuse to valorize guilt" the way

Americans do. Instead, the French actively fight against it, and they help each other fight against it.

Let's choose to reject guilt.

You need to let God be God. So much of what we beat ourselves up for is simply not our responsibility. Let me assure you—you are a lot of wonderful things. You've been blessed with unique gifts and talents, and a huge capacity to love and care for your family. But you are not God. You are not all knowing, all-powerful, or in control of the world. You're not even in control of your own little part of the world. Sometimes guilt is just a way of trying to maintain control of something that really belongs to God. Letting go can be scary, but it is oh so freeing.

Commitment is not the same thing as attention. The fact that you can't focus 100 percent of your attention on your kids or your family has nothing to do with how committed you are to them. Let that sink in. I'm fully committed to my family all the time, but I don't give them all of my attention or energy in any one day. It's completely impossible! And what's more, it certainly wouldn't be good for them.

The perfect mother doesn't exist. According to Pamela Druckerman, this phrase is something of a mantra for French mothers. And it's a good one. You're not a perfect mom, but neither is anyone else (no matter what Pinterest or Facebook would have you believe). She doesn't exist! Among your high expectations and the lofty goals you strive for, you have to remember to keep things in perspective. Next time you're feeling a wave of that familiar mommy guilt, it's worth asking yourself, "What am I expecting here? Is this a 'perfect mother' thing?"

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