



B.C. Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association

MEMBER UPDATE

ReFresh

May 4, 2022



This week...

Free yourself from the weight of GUILT!

One thing I have learned while working at the BCPVPA is that Principals and Vice-Principals are one of the most committed groups of professionals I have worked with; they give so much to those around them – students, staff, and parents.

I have also learned through many conversations with Principals and Vice-Principals that they push themselves to the very limits and, in some cases, beyond. Even when PVPs are not able to function at their highest capacity because of burnout, they have trouble taking time away from work to reset. This is because many are afflicted with a condition that pushes them past a line that is healthy or constructive – GUILT!

Different Types of Guilt

Did you know that there are different types of guilt which can even overlap?

1. **Natural guilt** – a normal reaction and feeling of remorse over something we did or failed to do. This form of guilt passes quickly. It could result from something as small as forgetting someone's birthday, and then feeling bad for a short period because of it.

Guilt in these scenarios is of value if the feeling motivates you to correct the situation. This type of guilt should be resolved quickly through proactive actions: admitting you were wrong, apologizing for forgetting, and making amends where it makes sense. Taking responsibility for your mistakes or inaction should alleviate this guilt.

2. **Existential guilt** – this is a negative feeling that may be associated with trauma, and/or arises out of a perceived injustice in the world. This form of guilt may result in nightmares, insomnia, an inability to function, social isolation, feelings of fear, emotional detachment, avoidance of usual activities, and could be a form of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) if it lasts more than four weeks. Treatment should be sought immediately if the feelings persist for more than a few weeks.
3. **Free-floating, or toxic guilt** – this form of guilt could come from a sense of not being a good person, feeling like a failure, or feeling that you let other people down. This form of guilt may be associated with depression, and if it persists for more than two weeks or impedes daily activities it is time to seek care from a mental health professional.

This is the type of guilt that is often demonstrated by Principals and Vice-Principals, as a consequence of their powerful work ethic and level of commitment. In last year's Thriving in Education survey, we asked members to respond to the statement:

I am feeling increasingly guilty because I cannot get all my work done.

One in three members agreed or strongly agreed with this statement!

I hear about this is type of guilt from members who are struggling at work due to health conditions: folks who know they should consider taking time to look after themselves, and folks who now have to take time away from work for their health. In both cases, they regularly comment on the heavy burden of guilt they feel, as they believe they are letting down their team. What is often forgotten is that guilt ***is a wasted emotion in these scenarios.***

Check out this video [on 7 things you should NOT feel guilty for.](#)

Who Feels Most Guilty?

Why do some people feel higher levels of guilt than others, particularly about things that are out of their control (such as workload or the onset of an illness)? Well, their tendency to feel guilt more intensely could be linked to:

1. **“A Personality” type, e.g:**
 - I. Anxious
 - II. Perfectionist
 - III. Strong work ethic / overcommitted
 - IV. Extreme sense of responsibility
2. **Childhood experiences:** Often guilt is linked to how we were brought up as children. If you had a parent or caregiver who relied on guilt as a behavioural motivator when you were a child, you are more likely to feel guilt.
3. **Culture:** If you find yourself doing things that are in opposition to the cultural norms you were raised with, you may experience guilt even if you no longer believe in or support those norms.
4. **Religion:** Some religious traditions rely on feelings of guilt to indicate that a person has done something wrong.
5. **Social pressure:** If you feel that other people are judging you for the things that you have done, you may be left with feelings of guilt and remorse.

Identifying the Source of Guilt

Has someone ever made you feel bad about something you did or didn't do?

You may have someone you work or live with such as a supervisor, a peer, a spouse, even a parent who likes to lay on a strong guilt trip.

Don't buy a ticket for that trip!

Guilt can be a powerful weapon, and many people know how to wield it skillfully. Even when you've done nothing wrong, the other person might imply that a difficult situation is somehow your fault. They make their unhappiness clear, and leave it to you to find a way to fix the problem. If you feel guilty about their suffering, you're more likely to do what you can to help, thereby reinforcing their poor behaviour.

Guilt-tripping behaviors often show up in close relationships where you care about the other person's feelings, and this can be exploited because you have strong emotional ties.

Is someone trying to guilt-trip you?

Examples include:

- Point out their strengths and hard work to make you feel inferior or that your work falls short
- Make sarcastic or passive-aggressive remarks about challenging situations
- Give you the silent treatment
- Show no interest in doing anything to improve the situation themselves
- Use body language to communicate displeasure (sighing, crossing their arms, or slamming objects down)
- Make remarks meant to appeal to your emotions, such as, “Remember when I did this thing for you...?”

When these behaviours start to become a pattern, it becomes more concerning. Someone feeling hurt might use guilt trips when they don’t know any other way to deal with their emotional turmoil. These factors don’t make guilt-tripping any more productive, but they can help you keep a more compassionate perspective as you set boundaries. Boundaries protect your needs while also teaching the person trying to guilt-trip you that you won’t respond the way they’d like. This can help them see the benefit of exploring other communication methods.

Check out [this video](#) that provides ideas on how to politely set those boundaries.

At the far end of the spectrum, guilt-tripping can involve outright [manipulation](#). This can happen in abusive relationships, so it’s important to reach out for help if:

- someone tries to guilt you into doing things after you say no
- the behaviour forms a pattern
- they won’t accept your apology for a mistake
- they make no effort to change
- they try to control your behaviour in other ways
- you feel as if you can’t do anything right
- you notice put-downs, gaslighting, or other emotional abuse

A therapist can help you identify guilt-tripping and other signs of abusive manipulation. They can also help you begin to recover from [abuse](#), and to develop a plan to get you additional support and safely leave the relationship.

Symptoms and How to Cope with Guilt

Guilt is often accompanied by symptoms related to anxiety, stress, and depression, including:

- Changes in sleep or inability to sleep (insomnia)
- Changes in appetite – either lack of appetite or stress-eating
- Lack of interest in activities you previously enjoyed
- Inability to concentrate or focus
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Feeling disconnected and withdrawing from social interaction

Coping

If you are trying to cope with persistent feelings of guilt, there are things that you can do that may make it easier to manage these difficult emotions. Some strategies that may help you cope with a guilt complex include:

Reframing the Situation

If you find yourself only focusing on negative thoughts, consider ways to think differently about the situation. Were there other factors that played a role? What can you do differently in the future? Find ways to shift your focus from the negative to a more realistic or positive perspective, which may help you move past your feelings of self-recrimination.

Forgive Yourself

Learning how to practice self-forgiveness can be an important tool for letting go of guilt. Forgiving yourself doesn't mean letting yourself off the hook if you've made a mistake or caused someone harm. Instead, it's about taking responsibility, allowing yourself some time to express remorse, make amends, and then find a way to move on.

Talk to Someone

Sharing your feelings with a close friend can sometimes be helpful. Social support can play a pivotal role in coping with difficult emotions, so maintaining your relationships with friends and loved ones is important. If you struggle to talk to your loved ones about feelings of guilt, or if they are not providing the type of support you need, talking to a mental health professional can also be helpful.

When feelings of guilt become persistent and overwhelming, it is important to seek professional help. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you are experiencing symptoms of excessive guilt or other symptoms of depression. Treatment with psychotherapy may also include

medications such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications to help you cope with symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one approach to treatment that involves learning to recognize the negative thoughts that lead to feelings of guilt. By learning to replace these thoughts with more positive ones, people may be able to let go of burdens that are contributing to their guilt complex. CBT can also help you to develop a better understanding of yourself – including your emotions and attitudes – which enable you to be better equipped to deal with emotionally stressful or manipulative situations.

Sources

Hackensack Meridian Health | [Feel Pandemic Guilt? You're Not Alone. Here's How to Overcome It.](#)

Healthline | [Think Guilt-Tripping Isn't a Big Deal? Think Again](#)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. M. Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.

