

# How to cope with parent guilt, during the pandemic and beyond

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As a mother, I'm vulnerable to the influence of our cultural messaging, and I have fallen prey to the "We can never give enough, do enough or be enough" narrative. As a psychologist, though, I know how risky this constant thread of guilt is for our well-being. Guilt can be helpful as an uncomfortable emotion that motivates us to make amends and change hurtful behaviors, but in the case of parent guilt, much of the time we are only hurting ourselves.

Enter a global pandemic that has shattered our already precarious parenting lives and provided [ample evidence of our systems' failures](#). Employers are expecting our remote-learning children to behave during our work day, and women are leaving jobs in record numbers for their suddenly homebound children, because they "just can't do it all anymore." [Ilyse DiMarco](#), a clinical psychologist and the author of the upcoming book "[Mom Brain](#)," sums up the problem: "The issue with guilt right now is there is potential guilt with anything you do."

Stress levels have risen, with parents outpacing nonparents in [surveys](#), creating fertile ground for mental health problems. "We're feeling like we're not measuring up in some



area or maybe we're not making the right choices," DiMarco says. "Not surprisingly, if we feel like we're failing, we feel depressed; if we're worried about not making the right decision, we feel anxious."

Daily life in a pandemic has given us a host of new reasons to feel guilty. In addition to the impossibility of simultaneously working, parenting and, in some cases, teaching our children, we face daily decisions around health and safety.

Do we allow play dates? What if all of my child's friends are playing basketball and I say no? What if we choose in-person school and our child gets covid-19, or we choose remote school and our child becomes depressed?

No good choices and no good answers, but guaranteed guilt, with a sprinkling of judgment caused by social pressures.

"Guilt is a useful emotion when it tells us we've done something wrong," says clinical psychologist [Jill Stoddard](#), author of "[Be Mighty](#)." "What's happening now is we feel like we've done something wrong even when we're doing the very best we can."

So, what can we do about the guilt hanging heavy around our collective necks? Experts suggest a combination of mindfulness, meaningful self-care and shifting our perspective.

## **Mindfulness**

**Do not ignore the guilt; acknowledging it means you can do something about it.** Even if our pandemic-related guilt may be misplaced, Stoddard says we can still use the feeling for its positive function and make amends. She has told her children, "I really wish I could spend more time with you guys, and it's been so hard on all of us. Things will be different someday. I'm sorry I can't be there for you more." She adds: "You're not saying, 'I screwed up.' You're saying, 'It hurts my heart I can't do this the way I wish I could right now.'"

**Remember you are not alone.** Feelings of failure are a universal experience of parents during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic. Seeking social support is critical for mental health in times of stress. It can be as simple as texting a friend to share “Mom fails” from your day. Even this brief connection offers support and solidarity, and it can decrease our sense of self-blame and inadequacy when we hear others’ similar feelings and experiences.

**Practice self-kindness.** Talk to yourself as you would your friend: “You are doing your very best in this moment.” This practice helps shift thinking patterns from self-criticism to self-compassion, which is known to increase positive emotions and decrease negative ones, including guilt.

## **Real self-care**

**Prioritize the daily demands on your time and energy.** DiMarco advises doing this by asking, “What’s most important here, on a day-to-day or hour-to-hour basis?” Focus on what is highest on the priority list, and allow yourself to let go of the other potential tasks instead of feeling guilty for, inevitably, not getting everything done.

**Prioritize yourself.** “An important piece, and counterintuitive piece, to manage guilt about not being there for everybody else, is to also be there for yourself, and make sure you’re on the list somewhere,” DiMarco says. Plan ahead to ensure time for you in the daily routine, even if it’s just 15 to 30 minutes. This may require an agreement with your partner and/or kids about when you will not be available the next day. Be realistic about the amount of time you need and how you will spend it (e.g., 15 minutes on a meditation app). Then, stay committed to making it happen.

**Remember the basics.** We make sure our kids are fed, but are we sleeping, drinking enough water, and eating well enough to meet our own basic needs? These stress management essentials strengthen us, which will help us ward off the guilt.

## Shift focus

**Adjust expectations.** “If you expect yourself to stay calm and never lose it, you’re setting yourself up for failure,” says child and adolescent psychologist [Emily W. King](#). “Own it that you’re more emotionally fragile right now, notice it and walk outside for 10 minutes, or whatever you need, instead of getting in a negative feedback loop, and then you’re emotionally exhausted.”

**Consider your successes.** Flip the script so you’re not focusing only on the negative. What do you feel proud of? What can your children do now they couldn’t do a year ago? Redefine success for you and your children during a global pandemic. “Success is not about grades but about independence or chores,” says King. For parents, success can be getting through each day with everyone sheltered, fed and in bed safely.

**Invent new narratives.** Instead of looking at yourself as being never enough, how about acknowledging that you have been — and continue to be — enough to endure a global pandemic while parenting? What recent generation of parents has accomplished this? In fact, we are not just enough, we are *so much greater*. Remind yourself of this when parent guilt attempts to tread that familiar path, both now and after the pandemic.

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