

Get a Grip on Mother's Guilt

Picture this: Fifty-something Hannah steps over the threshold into the Honolulu airport after deplaning with her husband. She is every bit as successful in business as her well-toned appearance would suggest. But beneath the designer clothes is another Hannah altogether...a Hannah plagued by guilt.

Hannah is not alone. At a time when many Baby Boomer mothers should be enjoying their "child-free" years, far too many are besieged with parental guilt.

I have talked to women around the country. From personal acquaintances to strangers at airports, they verbalize the same theme: Guilt for known or (even worse) unknown "crimes". Mothers feel guilty for doing too much and guilty for doing too little for their children; guilty for having worked outside the home and guilty for not having worked; guilty for divorcing their child's dad and guilty for staying. And what's most distressing is that they sometimes feel guilty when their adult children are upset with them, even when they have no idea what they have done!

No matter what the circumstance, there seems to be plenty of guilt to go around and plenty of mothers willing to embrace it.

Why is this happening?

- **Baby Boomer Moms' Expectations of Themselves**

Baby Boomers are the most educated and affluent generation to date. Theirs (mine) is a confident generation, with access to information, resources, and opportunity unlike any preceding one. They are achievers, surpassing their own mothers in the areas of careers and earning capacity. When a woman is successful, it is easy to get lured into the belief that she can control outcomes. When things don't go as expected, however, the temptation is to blame herself. And that is exactly what mothers do. In the realm of parenting, this means that many mothers of grown children believed that they could create specific outcomes, based upon their carefully made parenting choices. Generally this is a reasonable assumption, e.g. by providing extracurricular activities a child would have an enriched life experience. But no parent controls everything, nor should they. Too many mothers forget the value in the "struggle" that they themselves had to experience. Without any struggle, sons and daughters grow up with fewer chances to develop their own coping skills. In an effort to spare their children suffering, some mothers (and dads, as well,) continue to do too much. When their children hit the inevitable bumps in life, the Baby Boomer moms feel especially guilty, anxious, and confused. After all, they (the mothers) did all the "right" things. Yet, their children have imperfect lives. These mothers heap on the self-blame because they cannot solve the problems for their child, or because they are out of resources and cannot bail their children out any further.

- **Expectations of Baby Boomers' Children**

Many children of Baby Boomers have had unrealistic expectations of their parents. This situation has been fostered by the parents themselves and by having grown up in an affluent era. Mothers may be especially prone to creating the high expectations and "entitled" young adults. (Is not the definition of a good mother one who protects her children from harm? Don't "good" mothers want their children to have an easier life than they have had?") Because parents have had more resources, many children automatically expect that their parents will come to their rescue, sometimes time and again. When they do not, the adult children are quite disappointed. Some of these young adults actually have the equivalent of a twenty- or thirty-something tantrum. Rather than retreating to their rooms, however, they may send searing voice or emails, or pull away, sometimes taking the grandchildren with them. Too often the mothers, the target of the guilt-making behaviors, know no other way to absolve their guilt than to cave in to their child's desires and demands.

- **Blurred Boundaries Between Baby Boomers and Their Children**

There is more focus on the quality of the parent/child relationship now than in any prior generation. In fact, our culture has nearly an obsession with "relationships" of all kinds. Improving relationships has become one of the most frequently addressed topics in women's magazines, so it is no surprise that Boomer moms would take great care in fostering the quality of their familial connections. Many Baby Boomer mothers pride themselves on having a closer connection with their children than they had with their own parents. In addition, parenting styles have shifted over the past 2 generations. Authoritarian parenting gave way to more permissive styles that allowed for greater input by children in family matters. Parents frequently have wanted to be both parents and friends with their kids, which clouds the once better-defined boundaries between parents and their offspring.

Contributing to this shift in parent/child boundaries has been the changing demographics in American families. The increase in divorces has meant that more children are spending significant portions of their childhoods residing with just one parent. It is only natural in these circumstances that many children become "elevated" in status to the role of confidante to their parent. The resulting blurred boundary can make it more difficult for a parent to set limits and say "no" to her children, whatever their ages. Saying "no" then evokes feelings of guilt. The need to keep the relationship on an even keel will too often trump the competing need to set a firm boundary with an adult child whose requests may be beyond what the parent can meet. Some young adults take advantage of parental vulnerability to feeling guilty and use this to their own advantage.

What can a loving mother do?

- Recognize your own limits in what you can offer, both emotionally and financially, to your children. It is o.k. to say “no” if you have misgivings about a request.
- Frame struggles as opportunities for your adult child to grow. You cannot and should not solve or attempt to solve all of your child’s problems. Choosing to not step in may give your child the chance to face natural consequences (the best learning tool) and develop her own strengths.
- Learn to tolerate your adult child’s discomfort. Regardless of their age, adult children look to their parents for signals as to how they are doing. Normalize their discomfort as feelings that come with challenging times. Communicate your faith that they will find answers and solutions.
- Recognize that there are always other factors at work in a situation. Your child’s temperament and other stressors and relationships will impact how she is functioning at any given time. It isn’t always about you! For example, you may think that your getting a divorce damaged your child. You don’t know what would have happened had you stayed in the marriage. Resist the urge to automatically connect your child’s difficulties with something you have or have not done.
- Explore your own feelings of guilt. If your guilt is tied to a specific action, and you wish to make amends, do so! If your guilt feels vague and all-encompassing, or you feel worthless or undeserving of love, your guilt may be unhealthy. Do more exploring to better understand the source of these feelings. Make a plan with a trusted person to get rid of the unhealthy guilt.
- Remember, you never were, nor will you be, a perfect mother. None of us are. It is enough that you do your best. Even (and especially) if you have a child who is unforgiving, you can work on forgiving yourself.