

I should...no, I choose!

"Guilt is defined as internalized anger over perceived and unwanted obligations."
— Lloyd J. Thomas

There's not much more weight one can carry on one's shoulder's as when one says: "I should (do or be)..." The energy that emanates from "shoulding" is heavy and very much guilt-inducing. Coupled with feelings of guilt are feelings of resentment and a subtle or not-so-subtle frustration or anger from feeling chained to a "should" situation.

The underlying challenge of "shoulding" is that if I do what I think I should, I most often feel resentful, or hateful, or angry, and if I don't do what I should, I feel guilty. "Shoulding" on one's self never brings inner peace or a sense of well-being. Just the opposite.

The unspoken message of "shoulding" is that I feel I am supposed to live up to, or follow, my own expectation, belief or demand, or some else's belief, expectation or demands – a parent, a relative, a friend, a cultural norm, a media mantra – that somehow I am moving through my life at work, at home, even at play needing to do what I believe I should do or adhering to a belief someone else has about what I should do. I'm always reacting to the belief, to the should.

The antidote to "should."

"A life of reaction is a life of slavery, intellectually and spiritually. One must fight for a life of action, not reaction."
— Rita Mae Brown

The antidote to should is "I choose." When we change our internal script from "should" to "choose", we take ownership of our actions. We are in charge; we are in control. The energy underneath "I choose" is empowering and freeing - even if I choose "not to be" or "not to do". Since I am making the choice, even when I choose "not to", the burden of guilt has been lifted. I am indebted to no one, but myself. That "inner judge and critic" that wags its finger and shakes its critical and judgmental head when I don't do what I "should" is now silent, almost nonexistent. Freedom and lightness arise.

"I choose to get started on that report." "I choose to ask a colleague to lunch." I choose to leave early to attend my daughter's dance recital." "I choose to clean my house." "I choose to cook my own dinner rather than pick up a fast food meal." "I choose walk for half an hour in the morning." "I choose to lessen my sugar intake." All choices, my choices. I'm consciously choosing to be in charge of my life.

The freedom that comes with making my own "choice" (i.e., "Do I choose to do/be...?") also allows for two responses:

1. No. I consciously don't choose to do/be that in this moment. I can choose to do/be at a later date, or maybe not at all. And that's perfectly OK. I'm in charge of my life and I make the choices I want to make.
2. Yes. I consciously choose to do/be now and I also know I'll feel better if not during the act, at least afterwards.

Even though choosing "not to do/be" may have consequences rather than benefits, I know I am in charge, I am strongly grounded in my decision and I have the power to make that choice. In this way, I am empowered; I am not a victim. I'm not living according to my own or anyone else's programming. I'm conscious and awake in my choosing.

"The more I give myself permission to live in the moment and enjoy it without feeling guilty or judgmental

about any other time, the better I feel about the quality of my work."
— Wayne Dyer

What can we learn from "shoulding?"

If you're one who lives life enmeshed in guilt from consistently telling yourself "I should..." this would be an opportune time to inquire into "why" you are actually choosing to live this way, feeling guilty most of the time, living under the weight of "I should". When you increase your level of self-awareness you increase your capacity to live life "at cause" instead of "at effect." When you live life "at cause", you are in charge, in control; you choose. When you live "at effect", you are reactive, living like a puppet whose "strings" are controlled by some belief, person or force that tells you how to do, be or have. You're the victim.

So, here's an exercise that can support you to free yourself from the "prison of should" and take charge of your life, to live "at cause":

- Explore your beliefs (shoulds) around an area of your life (e.g., career and livelihood, intimacy and partnership, personal and spiritual growth, friends and family, health and wellness, personal environment and organization, abundance and finances, play and recreation). List some of those beliefs (shoulds).
- As you explore some of these beliefs and the shoulds, one at a time, observe, watch and witness how you react when you say that belief aloud. What happens in your body, your feelings, emotions, and with your breath? What judgments (shoulds) do you hear your Inner Judge and Critic voicing?
- How is your behavior programmed by this belief, this "should"?
- What habitual acts or reactions, behaviors, statements, do you find yourself making as a result of this belief or should?
- What happens if you choose not to follow this belief? How does your body feel, what feelings or emotions come up? Do you feel guilty? Is there someone's else's "voice" underneath this belief that is telling you: "You 'should' do/be this way? Whose voice is it? Do you feel guilty if you don't "obey" this voice? Why?
- What would happen if you made a modest test and chose to not follow this belief, to act against this particular "should"?

The purpose of this exercise is to become "conscious" of "who I am" and "how I am" as I live my life at work, at home or at play – to look at the ways I live habitually and reactively, and not from a place of conscious choice. Awareness of your thoughts and feelings in one experience in one area of your life in this modest test will give you invaluable information about your self. Knowing "what makes you tick" and behave the way you do will support you to make conscious, different and healthier choices in the future, putting you more in control of your life, and begin to reduce the degree of programming that has run your life. When you stop "shoulding" on yourself, you allow your mind, body and spirit to rest and support yourself to engage in life with a heightened sense of empowerment, control and well-being.

"Always repenting of wrongs done will never bring my heart to rest."
-- Chi K'ang

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Do you feel guilty much of the time about never being able to recapture the time you're sacrificing today to get ahead? What "should" brings you to act in a way that causes you to feel guilty? What would happen if you "chose" to act differently?

- What beliefs about the holidays do you have that make you feel guilty, angry or resentful? What "shoulds" are involved? Whose "shoulds" are they? What would happen if you chose to act differently this holiday season?
- What do you consistently get on your own back about? What beliefs and "shoulds" bring you to beat yourself up constantly?
- What beliefs or "shoulds" cause you guilt around food, exercise, family, friends, work, finances, and other areas of your life? Why?
- What commitment or promises have you made that cause you to feel guilt or fear? Why did you make these commitments? Were you acting "at cause" or "at effect?"
- Do you "go along to get along" at work, at home or at play? Does this behavior bring you happiness and inner peace, or guilt and resentment? Why?
- Can you banish the word "should" from your vocabulary for one day, or one week? Can you choose to do so?
- Was "you should..." a familiar refrain when you were growing up? Have you brought these childhood "shoulds" into your adult life? Do they lead to inner peace, harmony and well-being or to fear, resentment and guilt?

"Guilt is anger directed at ourselves--at what we did or did not do"
Peter McWilliams, Life 101

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