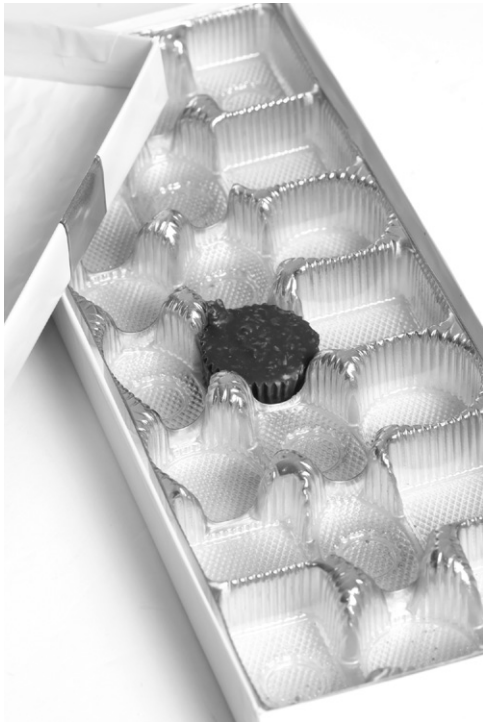


Chapter 7



Don't Feel
Guilty

This book is all about a journey to a new and better place in your life – a world of liberation and choice, instead of the world of servitude you may have been enduring. If you've been trying out the "Do Less" challenges, then you've begun that journey. But the journey may not be without its ups and downs. And there are two things, in particular, that might have the potential to seriously derail you. So you need to watch out for them and be ready to deal with them when they appear. These two things are guilt and approval seeking.

1 Guilt

It can come in many different flavours. The one we're talking about here is not what you feel when you've done something bad. Rather it's about recognizing and dealing with that nagging feeling you get when you start to change your behaviour – for example, as you start to apply the concepts of this book.

If you're going to start doing less, you may feel guilty, for example, when everyone around you is still rushing around at warp speed. This could be equally true in work or in your personal life. In work, a particularly common form of guilt is the one when you leave on time having done what you set out to do that day, and other people stay late because that's what the culture of the organization demands. And you can feel guilty all by yourself – you manage to stop just being busy and give yourself a little oasis of time and then you find that "it doesn't feel right"; that you really should be doing something. These are just some examples of the way guilt can come out and bite you.

2 Approval seeking

We all want people to like us. And we would like to feel that when we make some positive improvement in our lives, that

those around us would be happy for us and would applaud. In reality that is often not the case. People can disapprove of or resent our new behaviour. Maybe our work colleagues don't like that we're now suddenly leaving on time. (Could well be there's a certain amount of envy at work there too.) Or our partner/wife/husband/housemate may not like that we've cut back on some mundane chore and now invest the time in some more life-enhancing thing. It's a truism that most people are resistant to change and this, in turn, may lead to their disapproving of us and our behaviour.

So what do we do if and when these two things occur? Let's take them in turn.

Guilt and how to avoid it

Guilt – worrying about things that have happened in the past, things that are over and done with, that cannot be changed – has to be one of the silliest and least productive things we do. You would have thought that if you didn't "do" guilt much or at all, then that would be regarded as a good thing. People would compliment you on it, saying things like "My, I like how little you feel guilty about things. How did you get to be like that? Could you teach me to be like that too?"

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. If you don't feel guilty, you're regarded as a "bad" person. You don't "care" enough. (Note that this is also true if you're a person who deals well with stress. You're accused of not worrying enough and therefore, not caring enough.)

There also seems to be a tendency to believe that if you feel guilty long enough, then that will somehow eventually expunge your "crime" – that bad thing you did in the past – and you will be exonerated in some sort of way. So let's say you start doing less using the two filters as we've described but then you start

to feel guilty. And rather than deal with that guilt, you just carry it around with you, as though – if you do that for long enough – it will somehow make you feel better.

And it has to be said that the idea that you might do less is almost guaranteed to trigger some form of guilt. Doing less brings with it connotations of:

- Being lazy.
- Not being a team player.
- Skiving off.
- Letting other people carry more than their fair share while you carry less than yours.

Here, it's important to distinguish between guilt and learning from your mistakes. Clearly, the latter is a good thing. You analyze what happened and your behaviour. You try to figure out why you did what you did. You then see if there are things you can change or improve and off you go – carrying on with your life, resolving to do better next time out. Build a bridge and get over it, as the saying goes. But endlessly looking back over something that can never be changed? Crazy.

There is another really interesting aspect to guilt that is relevant to us here. Why would we choose to engage in such negative behaviour? What's in it for us? Well, quite a lot actually, as it turns out. Let's say we stay late at the office because we'll feel guilty if we leave on time. Well, that's neat because we can now blame our boss or the culture of the organization or something else for the fact that we are working these long hours and not seeing our children or whatever.

It's important to distinguish between guilt and learning from your mistakes.

That's great because then all responsibility for dealing with your overloaded situation passes from you. You buy a book like this, read it, do a half-hearted version of what it says and then blame me or the book or somebody or something else for its failure. It certainly wasn't anything to do with you. Psychologists call this a "payoff". You engage in some negative or self-destructive behaviour (in this case, feeling guilty) because you get something positive out of it. The positive you get here is that you can blame somebody else for your situation and not take responsibility for sorting it out yourself.

A question I often ask on my *The Power Of Doing Less* courses is this: "If you're overloaded, who's to blame?" Sometimes people begin with things like, "my boss", "the culture of the organization", "the state of the economy" but pretty soon they all converge on – and agree on – "me!"

If you're overloaded, you're to blame – because you haven't told anybody you're overloaded; because you're not taking any action to deal with the overload. If I'm your boss and I keep throwing stuff over the wall to you and you keep accepting it, then the only conclusion I can draw is that you have the bandwidth to do it. Otherwise you would have told me something different . . . wouldn't you?

Any time you have a guilty moment, write down what exactly it was about, when it occurred, why it occurred and who was involved. Then see what kinds of patterns emerge from this. Are there always certain people involved? Are there certain situations where guilt occurs? Try to understand why these patterns are happening and figure out things you can do to stop them.

For example, maybe the guilt moments always involve your boss. So now, you can start to anticipate these and work on not feeling guilty after an interaction with him/her.

Or the guilt may always be about the same thing. A common one is leaving work on time while other people stay late. Ask

yourself whether you felt happier as a result of this behaviour? Did you get to go home and have fun with your kids or a nice evening with your loved one or work on some pet project or hobby of yours?

If you did, isn't that good? And didn't you feel good? And almost certainly didn't you find that, even if you felt guilty some of the time, the rest of the time you "forgot" about your guilt – and just got on with having a nice time. So if you forgot about your guilt once, you can forget about it again. And the more you do this thing that used to make you feel guilty, the more you'll "forget" to feel guilty. Until one day, you'll find yourself not feeling guilty at all and wondering what all the fuss was ever about.

You should be living according to what makes *you* happy, i.e. *your* values, rather than someone else's.

Do Less – Throw Away Your Guilt

For a week or so keep a list of all the times you felt guilty – whether in work or in your life generally. Grade them on a guilt scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is a small amount of guilt and 10 is mind-numbing, depression-causing, sickness-inducing guilt. Now add up the scores.

What did you get? Well, actually, it doesn't matter at all whether they add up to one or a million. It doesn't make the slightest bit of difference. Just throw the list away! Guilt! It belongs in the trash.

GENERATING MYSTIQUE THROUGH DOING LESS

The author J.D. Salinger wrote nothing after 1965 but his reputation was only enhanced by his absence and the mystique it generated. In a rare 1974 interview with *The New York Times*, he explained: "There is a marvelous peace in not publishing . . . I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure." Salinger once referred to publication as "a damned interruption".

An obituary in *The Telegraph* on 28 January 2010 stated, "His career demonstrated that a reputation, even cult status, could be comfortably maintained by a very small amount of published work". (Something for me to ponder there myself!)

Approval-seeking and how to avoid it

We all want people to like us and part of that liking is that we feel that they approve of what we do. If you start to do less, then – as we have seen – that will have a positive impact on you (and on others). But it's as certain as night follows day that not everybody will support or approve of what you're doing.

So what are you to do about that? How are you to feel good about doing less – particularly when other people don't appear to feel good about it? And what's worse, when these are the very same people who may have very much approved of the way you operated previously.

Have a look at the following table.

1904	56	37
1920	60	34
1936	61	37
1964	61	39
1972	61	38
1984	59	41

The figures in the first column are years. The middle column shows the percentages of the popular vote that the winner achieved in the US Presidential election that year. I have chosen these particular years because they are generally regarded as having been "landslide" victories. A landslide victory is one in which a party or a candidate wins by an overwhelming margin, i.e. an overwhelming degree of popularity or approval. Here's the full table.

Year	Winner & percentage	Loser & percentage
1904	Roosevelt 56%	Parker 37%
1920	Harding 60%	Cox 34%
1936	Roosevelt 61%	Landon 37%
1964	Johnson 61%	Goldwater 39%
1972	Nixon 61%	McGovern 38%
1984	Reagan 59%	Mondale 41%

What's striking about these figures is the rightmost column. A landslide victory, "an overwhelming degree of approval", still means that nearly 40% of the people *don't* approve.

"In the end it's really only my own approval or disapproval that means anything."

- AGNETHA FALTSKOG, Ex-Abba singer

What are we to take from this? Well, I think we can safely say that even when some action we take is immensely popular, there will be people who don't approve of it. From which we can pretty much deduce, as Sherlock Holmes might have said, that approval seeking is a mug's game.

So what? We don't want to be liked and approved of? No, of course we want those things. There's no question about that. Recently, I went to see a Bruce Springsteen concert. There were about 35,000 people there. It's probably fair to say that there wasn't one person there who didn't think the Boss was just about

the greatest thing that has ever happened. 35,000 people screaming out their approval for you. What must that be like? And not just once, but night after night. Must be an amazing feeling and something that very few of us are ever going to experience.

Most of us probably have more modest expectations. We would like the people around us, the people with whom we come in contact, to like us, to approve of us and the things we do. But is everyone going to approve of us? Don't think so? And even if they did, would they approve of everything we did? Come on now – don't be ridiculous.

Yet sometimes, we feel that we can't move forward or change our behaviour until we get this approval. And that could scupper all of our endeavours. Because we might decide that we *can't* change our behaviour and we daren't start to do less because then that approval we so badly need won't be forthcoming.

When you start to do less, it won't take you long to spot these people and their disapproval. The snide remarks will start coming thick and fast. A fairly classic example is the one where the culture of your organization is the continuous-long-hours culture and you start leaving on time. It won't be long before somebody says to you, "I see you took a half day yesterday". This could equally be true in your domestic life where somebody might start to remark (often unfavourably) on things you've started to do differently. For example, there were some chores you used to do in the morning but now you leave them until some other time because you've started going for a run instead.

The big question is how do you deal with these people? I have two pieces of advice. The first is that you have a policy of zero tolerance. The second is that I've found that the idea of a role model is a good way of tackling this.

Zero tolerance

If you allow people to show their disapproval – they will.

If you don't – they won't.

It's actually as simple as that.

So as soon as you get the first snide remark, deal with it head on. In work, if somebody does try the "I see you took a half day" thing, say, "Yes, I got all the important stuff done and then I went home. I don't deal with unimportant stuff". And if you wanted to, you could add "You should try it sometime". Or – if you're not feeling quite so nasty – "If you like, I'll show you how to do it".

This is all equally true in your personal life. The most obvious examples of when this is likely to occur are when you swap some piece of drudgery for a more life-enhancing thing. Exercise/getting out instead of crashing in front of the TV or messing around on your Facebook page. More fun and less chores. Doing "something" instead of "nothing".

If somebody complains or gets huffy or gives you the silent treatment, explain what you're doing and why. Show them the immense value of getting to live the life you were meant to live – and explain that you could help them to achieve that too.

Role models

And if all of that sounds very in-your-face for you, then this is where role models come in. A role model is somebody we

should behave like. Basically you pretend you're somebody else or you ask the question, "What would so-and-so do in these circumstances"? Apart from anything else, it can be fun, imagining that person instead of yourself, at that meeting or confronted with this particular situation or person.

So here are two of my favourites. First is the great American President, Abraham Lincoln, the man who steered the country through four years of terrible civil war, held the Union together and abolished slavery. Here's the man himself:

"If I were to read, much less to answer all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how – the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out alright, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right won't make no difference."²⁰

And the other is Winston Churchill. Churchill was the British Prime Minister in 1940. At that time, much of Central and Eastern Europe had been conquered by the seemingly invincible Nazis. France would shortly fall and the Nazis would be in Paris. The US Ambassador in London was briefing Washington on Britain's imminent defeat and surrender. The equally seemingly invincible Japanese Empire was threatening Britain's eastern possessions and the British Army had left most of its equipment behind when it had retreated from Dunkirk. Churchill's own cabinet was wavering and Britain seemed defenceless.

Into this situation stepped Churchill. Talk about cometh the hour, cometh the man. Speaking in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, Churchill honestly explained the situation and then asked his people to face all this down. Alone, if necessary. You can actually listen to the speech on YouTube – search for "We Shall Fight on the Beaches".

Churchill is also the man who said, "You have enemies? Good. That means that you stood up for something, sometime in your life."

But these are just two of my favourites. Think of your own – people whom you admire, people you think seem to live life on their own terms, who call it as they see it, who never go along with the crowd just to be popular. They don't have to be celebrities or famous people; they could equally be people who are part of your life.

The next time you feel resistance from someone when you're trying to do less, try to picture somebody you really admire there in your shoes and ask yourself the following questions. Would that person you admire have:

- Changed their position just because of disapproval? For instance, would they have stayed late just because it was the done thing to do?
- Watered down some statement they wanted to make or altered their position on some issue or not passed on bad news? For example, would they have said that a particular project's constraints were achievable when their planning had told them that they definitely weren't?
- Felt unhappy because somebody disagreed with them? Would they have become depressed because somebody was sulking or wasn't speaking to them?
- Gone along with the crowd? Would they have worked all the hours god sent just because everybody else did it?
- Said "yes" when they should have said "no"? Would they have agreed to a deadline when it was clearly impossible?
- Been intimidated by anybody – a boss or co-worker or family member or friend who expressed disapproval of their behaviour?

In summary – you have to continue to focus on what matters to you – what your right stuff is. You may well get push back/resistance from other people. Sadly, that's just the way the world is. It's a bonus if people support you. It's an even bigger bonus if they're interested in learning from you. But however they react, remember that it's your life, not theirs. It only matters that you approve of yourself and your actions. The approval of others is pleasant but irrelevant.

So finally

It may be that when you start to do less, these evil twins of guilt and approval seeking will appear. The first thing is not to be surprised if they do. It probably happens to everybody who goes down this road and who makes the journey we are making.

As I've tried to show, neither of them are very smart things to engage in – and that idea alone may be enough to stop you from even giving them the time of day. Nor are they inevitable parts of our lives and of being a human being. They can and should be expunged, excised, thrown over the side. Don't let other people foist these things on you. Resist when they do. Operate a zero tolerance policy. You'll be making your life and the world generally a better place.

Do Less – Live the Life You Were Meant to Live

Spend a whole day doing less. By this I mean: do what really matters to you – in work and in your personal life – and leave it at that. While you're doing this, if anybody disapproves or you find yourself feeling guilty, deal with it right there and then.

This is a tough one – and you could find yourself feeling quite different at the end of the day. You may feel like you behaved quite “out of character” today. It might almost feel like you had been a different person entirely during the day. That's all good.

Before you go to sleep spend some time writing down what happened, how people reacted, what you did, how you felt then and how you feel now.

"Sow a thought,
and you reap
an act;
Sow an act, and
you reap a habit;
Sow a habit,
and you reap
a character;
Sow a character,
and you reap
a destiny."

[– SAMUEL SMILES, 19th century
Scottish author]