

The Guilt-Free Formula for Putting Yourself First



You might work full time or have a demanding job.
You probably run a household.
You have your fair share of commitments.
You say yes to virtually everything and everyone.

You feel overextended and pulled in different directions. You give to so many people and causes, but you don't nearly give to yourself as much as you know you "should." You're feeling irritable, cranky and tired more often than you'd like. You've even put some of your goals, dreams, and aspirations on the backburner.

What happened to your *me-time*?

When's the last time you spent nourishing quality time with your girlfriends?

When's the last time you really laid back and had **FUN**?

Or perhaps you do see your BFFs and have that R&R time every now and then; however, you can't seem to get yourself to make these nourishing actions a regular part of your schedule.

Let's Talk about Guilt

According to the Oxford Dictionary, **guilt** is "the fact of having committed a specified or implied offense or crime . . . a feeling of having done wrong or **failed in obligation**." Merriam-Webster offers up a few spot-on synonyms: regret, remorse, **shame**.

Whether you feel guilty for saying no, or if you feel guilty at even the *thought* of saying no, to others' (family, job, volunteer causes) demands on your time, would it be safe to say that what you feel is ashamed for having failed them? Or perhaps you're afraid to fail them and that's why you keep saying yes?

Sweet pea, your being martyr doesn't serve anyone. When you give from a near-empty gas tank, you harm the people you claim to serve. You harm them in unforeseen ways. I know. I grew up with a martyr. My mom.

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My Story

My mom is the epitome of love and excellence. She's always given a lot of her time and resources to the people she holds dear. She's also (always has been) an incredibly hard worker so she gives just as much to her profession.

The problem with all this was that I witnessed a whole lot of over-giving when I was growing up. I would see this very accomplished and busy woman come home from a full work day; she barely relaxed and unwound before heading straight into the next to-do list item, whether that item be for her job or the household.

She would cook, clean, do the shopping, be the good wife, be the good mom and be the accomplished professional. But when she felt like the recipients of all this giving weren't giving back as much, she'd take a nose dive into resentment. And she wasn't shy about guilt tripping, telling us how much she gives and how much everyone else doesn't.

I remember a specific instance where one or two extended relatives asked her for money to help with their personal problems and I could see how torn she was. I could hear it in her voice and I could see it in her face that what she really wanted to say was no. But she was debating how she could oblige even though I could see how spread thin she already was with other commitments.

As a witness to all this *sacrifice*, I was mad. My mom's this powerful beautiful creature, yet she acted so powerless at times! It made me not want to have a husband or kids. She didn't seem happy. I remember her as tired and upset.

Is this the impression you want to make on your children?



What I eventually came to realize was that having a household wasn't the problem. It was the sense of obligation that emerges when one person feels the need to take responsibility for so much.

Then there's me. I've gone through periods of putting myself second or last so I know what that feels like. I've tended to generally err on the side of putting myself first, by making sure my emotional, physical and spiritual cups runneth over before extending more than I could actually give to others. With my instincts in this area, I've been able to teach my mom how to walk away, trust in Divine order and take care of herself differently.

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I knew I had an effect when one day (I was either a teenager or young adult) my mom told me how much of an impact I had made on her, that she's able to put herself first and that she learned this from me. A few years ago she also told me that she sometimes asks herself, "What would Valerie do?" when faced with a decision.

My mom's a natural giver, so that will never change (nor would I want it to); however, there's a greater strength to her today than I remember her having in my formative years.



Let's talk about what happens when we put ourselves first.

Stop reading NOW if you DO NOT want to experience:

- A brighter outlook and uplifted perspective
- Trust and a deep knowing that all your responsibilities are taken care of without you having to micromanage them all
- Increased energy
- Time to see your friends and have fun!
- Regularly scheduled or many spur-of-the-moment sacred me-time
- Pursuing the things in your heart and on your mind. For example, although having a full-time day, I created opportunities to nurture my artistic and entrepreneurial endeavors. I went on auditions, rehearsed for performances and launched my business FeelGoodKickAss.com.

OK, we've talked about the problem and we've identified what we want to experience instead. So, *how do we get there?*

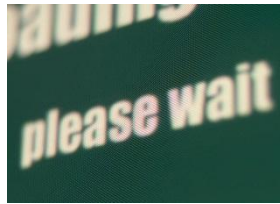
I believe the #1 way to putting ourselves first is by SAYING NO or finding an alternative solution to the requests on our time that leave us spread thin.

But saying no often comes with the excess baggage of guilt.

Well, I've got a formula to help you start putting yourself first the next time you are asked to do something that piles on more responsibility to your already full plate. In the process, my intention is that you start to release the guilt that keeps you stuck in putting yourself dead last.

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Step 1: “Let me get back to you.”



Wait at least 30 minutes before you say yes to a new request on your time. If you're at least a 7 on a 10 point scale (1 being you don't feel overextended and 10 being you feel extremely overextended) then I encourage you to wait at least 24 hours before getting back to the requestor.

Do you have a knee-jerk habit of not even giving yourself a chance to *contemplate* whether you can reasonably add another commitment to your already long list of to-dos?

Get into the new practice of saying, “Let me look over my schedule and get back to you.” This step also means giving yourself time before replying to an “urgent” text, email or voicemail.

If the boss asks you to work this weekend, try saying, “Can I get back to you?”

If he says, “I need to know now”, politely respond with something to the effect of “I understand your predicament and I'm all about being a team player. I want to do the best work possible. I just need to look over my schedule this weekend. I'm more than happy to get back to you in 2 hours.”

Congratulations! You've just bought yourself some time. Now, I imagine how grossly uncomfortable putting up a boundary like this can be; however, growth ain't always easy and it's usually uncomfortable. Relax. It's OK. You're doing something so incredibly remarkable for your well-being. Your peace of mind is worth the temporary discomfort. There will come a time when saying something like this won't feel so awkward.

Step 2: Expose the mindset.

Now that you've bought yourself some time, let's dive a little deeper.



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You already feel the strain this new request on your time will cause. But you hesitate. There's a lump in your throat or pitter patter in your chest that begs you to say no, but you find yourself justifying the yes. It's that justification that we want to dissect. Grab your journal or whip out your laptop. It's time to write.

You're going to do a stream of consciousness free-write. All this means is that you'll put pen to paper and just let whatever thoughts come to mind flow through your hand and onto the page. Don't censor yourself. Just write. Feel free to set a timer for at least five minutes.

You're going to journal answers to one, a combination or all of the following questions:

- If you say no, what are you afraid will happen?
- Do you fear the requestor will think negatively of you? Explain.
- Are you afraid something that "only you can do so well" will have a disastrous outcome if you hand it over to someone else? Explain.
- Who will be inconvenienced if you put yourself first in this situation? How will they be inconvenienced?

For example, let's say my hypothetical 11-year old son Jeffrey forgot to tell me about his basketball practice tomorrow. I made a long overdue appointment to get a massage, but Jeff asked me to pick him up. I feel torn and the guilt is beginning to emerge.

In my step 2 journaling I realized that if I try to find someone else to pick him up, I'm afraid Jeff will think I don't care about him. I'm afraid to ask my best friend Nancy because I think she'll view me as a pathetic mom who's always asking for favors with her "stupid son." Nancy's single and I don't want her to look down on me.

By shining a light in the dark corners, you're acknowledging the mindsets around the guilt. I could tell you to "just say no to further requests on your time"; however, would that really do you any good? If you could just say no, you wouldn't be reading this right now. We've got to peel a layer off this troubling onion. It's when you get to the bare bones of what's holding you back that you can start to dialogue with it and transform things.

When you know the mindset, you can catalyze a *mindshift*. We'll talk about *mindshifting* in the next step.

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Step 3: Have a conversation with the mindset.



You're going to look at what you wrote from the perspective of your Higher Self, the Universe, the Divine, that part of you that wants you to be fulfilled and satisfied. You're going to do another free-write, but this one you'll do differently.

For starters, the way you write will be different. I invite you to either choose a different color pen, write in cursive or all caps (if you wrote in print in step 2) or write with your opposite hand.

Second, before you even write, you're going to get centered. Set a timer for 2-5 minutes and breathe slowly in and out. Focus on your inhalations and exhalations or focus on your favorite mantra. You're inviting a higher perspective through this process of [getting centered](#).

Now answer this question with your different writing "style": **What does my higher self really think about this stuff I've just written?** Go ahead and write away.

With this uplifted perspective, it's time to create a *mindshift*: Let's entertain a different way of looking at things.

For example, an uncovered mindset in step 2 could be:

If I ask someone else to pick up my son, my son will think I'm selfish.

A corresponding *mindshift* could be:

My son loves me. Period. And when I take care of myself, I have so much more to give to him.

Another mindset/*mindshift* example could be:

If I ask for Nancy's help, she'll think I'm a bad mother.

Mindshift: I have no idea what Nancy thinks and even if she thought the worst of me, I am worth asking for what I need. My feeling right in the world is more important than what someone else "might" be thinking of me.

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You're not limited to writing just one *mindshift*. If you feel inspired to write more, go for it! Pay attention to how you feel when you introduce new *mindshifts*. If you feel a sense of ease and joy, then you've struck gold.

Step 4: Solidify the *mindshift* with different actions.

You might do the above steps and no longer feel the guilt that accompanies putting yourself first for the situation at hand. You might feel empowered to either say no or find an alternative solution so that your time is not spent doing things that will spread you thin. You might also do the above steps and still feel guilty even though you haven't said no yet!

Well, it's time to put some sweat equity behind the *mindshift* by taking the action that corresponds with someone who *would* believe the *mindshift*, even if you don't fully buy it right now.

Here's where the rubber meets the road.



You have got to do differently. There's just no way around it.

First, try on the belief that your son loves you no matter what and that when you take care of yourself, you'll have so much more to give him. Stand in front of a mirror and look into your eyes as you say this aloud. You are, in effect, trying on the *mindshift* as you would try on a beautiful new magenta blouse.

Now practice saying aloud what you would say to Nancy. Keep it short, sweet and simple. For example, "Hey sweet pea, Jeffrey just told me about an impromptu basketball practice tomorrow and I've already booked another appointment. Would you be a rockstar and please pick him up after practice? I'll totally treat you to lunch next week."

Once you've gotten coverage for Jeff's practice, keep it short and sweet with him as well, "Hey baby, I've got another appointment when you get out of practice, but auntie Nancy is going to pick you up, OK?" Remind yourself why you're doing this before you speak with him.

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These actions aren't comfortable, but I don't believe we need to wait until the fear goes away before taking action that will better our lives. Act in the face of the fear. You're worth it and you *can* do it.

Step 5: There's a higher order at play.



If you believe in some sort of Spirit, then now is the time to lean on it. Trust that you are being taken care of, that by taking care of yourself, you are taking care of those around you. Entertain the thought that your Higher Self wants you to be rested, nourished and at peace. I invite you to consider that the Source of All There Is has not laid the burden on you to solve everyone's problems and has not designated you to please everyone either.

When we do for ourselves, some people won't take it so well. But trust that they too are being looked after. If your self-care actions trigger angst within them, then that is their journey to walk. We each experience different learnings and areas of growth. Do not deprive others of theirs and do not stunt your own. Our individual and collective paths unfold exactly as they should.

If you don't believe in spirit, then what uplifting principles can you substitute? Do you believe in the good in people? Can you choose to believe that the good in all of us wants you to be rested, nourished and at peace? Try it on.

A belief is a thought you think with repetition, so start repeating a different thought.

Practice makes better.

That's it! This is the guilt free formula for putting yourself first. I know it's a lot, but I didn't want to skimp on value just because this is a freebie. These steps work! But they're not necessarily easy. Try them. It might feel awkward at first, but you are worth the persistence. Your peace of mind is worth it.

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Don't be surprised or get hard on yourself if you try this process once and still feel guilty. Practice makes better. You are exercising a different, maybe even brand new, muscle. Just keep at it.

I've enlisted the help of friends, accountability partners, support groups, life coaches and business coaches to help me make radical shifts in my life. Some of us can go it alone, but do not hesitate to get help if you need it. Talk about a supreme act of self-care. There's nothing like having someone else to keep us accountable, bounce ideas off of and help see our blind spots.

No matter your path, I wish you nothing but profound joy, fun and peace of mind.

Here's to putting yourself first!



P. Valerie Dauphin is a Dance Fitness Instructor and Self-Care Coach in Los Angeles. She has a passion for empowering “women who do it all” to put themselves first in all areas of their lives. Valerie ministers to the mind, heart and soul while working out the body in her World Dance Funk and ZUMBA® classes. During her downtime, you can find Valerie snuggling with her healthy boundary-enacting kitty, Kali.