

Graduating From Guilt

**Six Steps to Overcome Guilt
Guilt and Reclaim Your Life**

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Introduction



Six Steps to Freedom

How can we free ourselves from the guilt that drains our creativity, joy, and aliveness? Is there a way to be accountable for our actions without beating ourselves up? Is it possible that guilt has a positive purpose in our lives? What might that be?

You likely find your response to your own guilt unpleasant. When feeling guilty, you might continually replay situations in your mind without any resolution. You might avoid the other people involved.

You might pretend that nothing happened. You might attempt an apology, but still be left with lingering feelings that you've done something wrong. You might carry this guilt for days, months, years, even decades. All these options leave you stuck, judging yourself, living in the past, and disconnected from your authenticity, relationships, and presence.

Through living and teaching Nonviolent Communication (NVC) for the past nine years, I have accessed a completely different response to guilt. Guilt transformed through the six-step process explained here becomes an asset. Imagine that the next time you find yourself feeling guilty, you also feel eager to move through the six steps and into the gifts of greater authenticity and integrity!

During the last five years, I've guided hundreds of people through the process of Graduating From Guilt. In most cases, the guilt is 100 percent released in about twenty minutes. In a few deeper or longer-standing situations, participants reported feeling at least 80 percent less guilty—thus gaining much more lightness, freedom, and empowerment.

I find that laying out the whole process visually brings me clarity. In the Graduating From Guilt class, we create a large worksheet on a flip chart for reference. While the examples in this book are described in prose, I have also included a completed Graduating From Guilt worksheet at the end of each chapter. At the end of the book, on page 77, you will find a blank Graduating From Guilt worksheet for your own use.

I suggest that you read through the introduction to the six steps and at least two or three of the examples to get an overview of the process before working through your own situation. When you are ready to guide yourself through the steps, you might want a quiet space where you can really embrace the feelings that come up and experience the needs in your body. This will give you the maximum benefit of this full-body transformative process.

Step 1: Identify the Guilt

The first step in the Graduating From Guilt process is to define what you feel guilty about. It could be a specific action that you took (I yelled at my brother), an action that you failed to take (I didn't report my suspicions of domestic violence, and now my neighbor is in the hospital), or a general topic (I feel guilty about being a bad parent, an unappreciative child, or an irresponsible global citizen).



One day a woman, let's call her Jenny,¹ arrived at a Graduating From Guilt class and stated that she was feeling guilty about attending the guilt class. When we asked her to tell us more, she revealed that she had come straight to the class from work: She was feeling guilty because her dog was at home and hungry.

1: To protect client privacy, names and details used in this book have been changed.

Step 2: Name the “Shoulds”

The second step in the process is to identify your judgments—what you’re telling yourself you should or shouldn’t do about the situation. Sometimes these messages will flow easily; other times you may hold back, not wanting to subject yourself to that kind of blame and attack. I encourage you to uncover all the “shoulds,” even from the meanest bone in your body. After all, you are already telling yourself these things. We usually carry much more judgment unconsciously than consciously, and digging deeply into possible judgments allows us to discover what might be hidden inside. The more that is uncovered in this step, the deeper the potential for transformation and relief in the later steps.



We asked Jenny what she was telling herself about not feeding her dog. She told us that she shouldn’t starve her dog, she shouldn’t be so selfish, she shouldn’t have come to class, and she should be a responsible pet owner. I wrote these four should-statements on the board.

Sometimes, you will find just three or four should-statements; other times, you may have ten, or twenty, or more. Keep writing them as long as they are flowing. If you write down a judgment that doesn’t really ring true, you can cross it off your list later.

After compiling the list, read all your should-statements aloud, slowly. Usually one will feel more “charged” or tender than the others. Place a checkmark next to it for reference as you move forward.



I read Jenny’s should-statements to her, and she decided that “I should be a responsible pet owner” felt the strongest.

Step 3: Connect With the Unmet Needs

What sets Nonviolent Communication apart from any other communication modality I've encountered is what founder Marshall Rosenberg calls *Universal Needs*. Universal Needs are the qualities that support a meaningful and fulfilling life. They include survival needs such as food, air, shelter, and safety, as well as interpersonal and spiritual needs such as connection, love, autonomy, and contribution. (Please see the starter Needs list on page 84 at the back of the book.)

When first learning NVC, some people get confused about the distinction between *needs* and *wants*. Is a cup of coffee a need or a want? What about a date with Pat? Or a new car? A clear way to differentiate needs from wants is with the question, "Does everyone on earth need this?" A friend may say that she needs a new job. Does everyone on earth need a new job? No, many people all over the globe get along quite well without any job at all. So "a new job" would be a want, not a need.

Whether something is a need or not, your desire for it is still important to acknowledge. Once you've identified a desire (a "want"), you can identify the needs behind it with one simple question. In the case of my friend and the new job, to get to the need behind the want, I would ask, "What needs would be met by her getting a new job?" Perhaps security, or appreciation, creativity, contribution, or many other needs, depending on the specifics of her situation.

I was a participant many years ago at an NVC workshop where we were discussing the subject of needs. One person asserted that only survival needs, such as safety, warmth, food and air, could be considered true needs. Another member of the group responded, "I disagree. I have cancer, and when I don't get love, connection, empathy, laughter, and creativity, I feel my life force leaving me. When I do experience those qualities in my life, I feel myself strengthening. These are not the extras of life; these needs are life itself."

In another workshop, one that I was facilitating, a woman found the word *order* on the Needs list and quickly piped up, "Order can't be a Universal Need. You should see my son's room!"

I was glad to hear this statement, because one of the key points of NVC is that while we all have the same needs, we have different ways of meeting those needs.

Earlier in the day, this woman had described how her son thrived when he had a predictable rhythm to his day and week. So I observed, “I recall that your son does his best when his day and week have a secure rhythm to them. It seems to me that he meets his need for order through having his time orderly, not his belongings.”

It takes some practice to become adept at discovering needs underneath any want. Using the Needs list as a reference often helped me in my earlier days with NVC. If I couldn’t think of the need on my own, I would read over the list and find that one or more Need words immediately resonated with my experience. Even after nine years of studying and teaching NVC, consulting the list still helps me pinpoint an elusive need and deepen my self-understanding.

In step 3 of the Graduating From Guilt process, you ask yourself what Needs are not being met by your actions.



In connecting with her unmet needs, Jenny found many needs related to interdependence, such as care, nurturing, connection, and trust. She also found that her needs for trusting herself, for accountability, and for integrity were unmet. Her dog’s need for food was unmet, and Jenny’s needs for peace of mind and focus were also not met, as she was worrying about the dog instead of being focused on the class.

The number of Needs you identify will vary depending on the situation, from just a couple to nearly the whole list.

If defensiveness creeps in while you are connecting with Needs that aren’t met, see if you can put the defensiveness on hold and concentrate on the needs. For example, Jenny might have thought, “Why am I blaming myself about this? My dog hasn’t missed a meal in six months.” Defending yourself rather than connecting with the unmet needs may lead to temporary relief, but it will not bring you the full transformation that mourning the unmet needs will. When defensive thoughts come up, refocus on the question, “What needs are not being met by my action?” (It may be helpful to bring your attention lower in the body by settling your hands on your abdominal

area. In my classes, we sometimes place a small blue beanbag, one of the Centering Buddies,² on the abdomen to support a focus on needs.)

Step 4: Experience the Feelings of the Unmet Needs

We begin to experience the Feelings of the unmet needs simply by reading aloud the list of Needs compiled in step 3. It is important to pause for a moment after reading each need, to let its power sink in. As you connect with the unmet needs, allow your feelings to surface. You may still feel guilty. You may also notice other feelings emerging.



I read the list of unmet needs to Jenny. As I read each word, “Care, nurturing, connection, trust,” she became quieter, and deepened with herself. After reading the whole list, I asked her how she felt, and she said, “I’m worried about my dog.” After a pause, she added, “And sad because I know he needs me.” She sat with these two feelings silently for a few moments, then her distraught demeanor returned, and she said, “And I still feel GUILTY!!”

Sit with these feelings for as long as it takes to experience them fully. This may be one minute or twenty. If you have a set of Centering Buddies, place the heart-shaped beanbag over your heart and feel the weight on your chest. If you begin to cry, let the tears flow. It is important to actually feel the feelings that come up. If the steps become just a mental exercise, you probably won’t experience the actual shifts that free you from your guilt.

2: I developed the small colored beanbags called Centering Buddies as a somatic invitation to experience Feelings and Needs more deeply. A red-velvet beanbag in the shape of the heart is placed on the chest to invite connection with feelings. A blue-velvet circle beanbag is held on the abdomen (the core) to invite connection with needs (the core motivators). You can see the Centering Buddies in action at www.HollyEckert.com.

The purpose of step 4 is to mourn—to feel the regret and sadness that is already inside you (and which might have been covered up by the guilt). In this step, you bring yourself into present time by catching up with the suppressed, unmet emotions of the past.

Focusing on the Needs (step 3) rather than the judgment (step 2) will usually move you away from the guilt and into sadness or fear or both. However, if guilt is still a dominant feeling at this point, that's just fine. There are still several steps during which the guilt can be transformed.

Step 5: Connect With the Positive Motivations

Step 5 is the time to look at what possible positive motivations affected the choice that you made. According to NVC philosophy, every action is motivated by a beautiful need. In other words, whatever people say or do, they are trying to meet a need.

Even if someone's conscious motivation is to hurt another, if you keep going to deeper levels, you will always come to a positive motivation. Take for example a wife who leaves the family car with the fuel tank so low that the empty light is on, just so her husband will know how much she suffers when he does the same to her. Even if her conscious motivation is revenge, all we have to do is ask her the question, "When you get all the revenge that you want, then what need will be met?" I imagine that her answer might be, "Then he'll know how his actions affect me," revealing needs for empathy and understanding.

In step 5, you begin to see that your motivations were pure and that there were some very good reasons for choosing as you did (even if it ultimately resulted in some unmet needs for yourself or others). This clears the path for self-forgiveness. If you have trouble identifying your positive motivations, look once again to the Needs list.

It is often enlightening to compare the needs found in step 3 (the unmet needs) with the needs found in step 5 (the positive motivations). Notice, in the worksheet at the end of this chapter, that Jenny lists *connection* under both steps. This shows that connection is one of her biggest overall priorities in the situation. (See also the chapter on "Finding Independence.")



Jenny was worried about still feeling guilty at this point, but I asked her to refocus on the process and connect with why she came to the class. She said that she was hoping for better connection and sense of harmony with her family. She was also motivated by wanting more freedom and integrity in her own life, to live her life from a place of authenticity.

Noticing her positive motivations—connection, harmony, freedom, integrity, and authenticity—gave her some relief, but did not totally dissipate the guilt.

Step 6: Check In and Make a Request

Step 6 is a time for a check-in and action. Here is where we learn if we have graduated from our guilt. If so, we can take action from a place of clarity.

The check-in consists of the four parts of the Nonviolent Communication model.³

- ☑ **OBSERVATIONS:** Observe the action you took that stimulated the guilt in the first place. In the Graduating From Guilt process, we start with recalling what happened. For example, “I recall locking the door even after my son told me that he couldn’t find the key,” or “I recall telling Mary that I didn’t think she was cut out for the job.”
- ☑ **FEELINGS:** State how you feel in the present moment about what you recall doing. For example, “I feel sad and discouraged,” or “I still feel guilty.” Sometimes you will have already graduated from your guilt and may say, “I feel peaceful and satisfied.”

³: For more on the Nonviolent Communication model, please consult Marshall Rosenberg’s *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, available from PuddleDancer Press.

- ✓ **NEEDS:** Connect with the Need(s) related to the Feelings just stated. For example, “I feel sad because I didn’t meet my need for contribution,” or “I feel satisfied that I was meeting my needs for authenticity and integrity.” If your feeling is one of sadness, anger, fear, or guilt, you will be stating an unmet need. If your feeling is relief, satisfaction, or joy, you will be identifying a met need.
- ✓ **REQUESTS:** State what you’d like to ask yourself to do about the situation. Make sure your Request is a concrete action (Tape a note to the bathroom mirror and the front door) rather than a general goal (Try to do a better job at remembering).



Jenny started her check-in: “When I come to class, knowing my dog is at home waiting to be fed, I feel guilty because I haven’t met my needs for accountability and care. See, I still feel guilty!”

“Yes, you do,” I replied, “and I’m glad that you’re being honest with us about it. There is still one more part to step 6. What action can you take that would better meet your needs for accountability and care?”

With a puzzled look on her face, Jenny got quiet again. After a few moments, she began to beam. “Next time I go out in the evening, I could ask my neighbor to feed my dog!” she said.

Now, any of us in the class could have suggested this solution right from the start. Jenny couldn’t see any solution herself because she was caught up in her judgments and her feeling of guilt. Once she had gone through the process, she came to a deeper self-connection about the situation, and she could then make an empowering request of herself.

How's your level of guilt now?" I asked.

Jenny was quiet for a moment as she checked in with her guilt. Then she broke into a huge grin and replied: "You know what? It is completely gone!"

Most of the time, you will feel lighter, freer, and centered within your sense of integrity after completing the six steps. In some cases, you may still feel guilty at the end of step 6. If so, return to step 2, and either pick another should-statement you have already written or brainstorm some more. Then repeat steps 3 through 6 with the new should-statement until you feel the relief and freedom of graduating from guilt.