

Don't Run from Positive Guilt

Thom Rutledge, Author of *Embracing Fear*

Mary Beth told me that she was backsliding, losing whatever progress she had made in the last six months of therapy. She was spending more time with her parents and her sisters during the holiday season and feeling “guilty around the clock.” I asked her to tell me more about her constant guilt.



“I’ve always felt guilt easily, you know, assuming the blame for just about anything,” Mary Beth said. “But now it’s worse.”

“Worse in what way?” I asked.

She thought for a moment. “Well, I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but I think I am feeling guilt over more things. I’m feeling a lot of guilt when I do some of the things we talk about in therapy.”

“What kind of things?”

Positive guilt occurs when we begin to break rules that need to be broken.

“Not even ‘doing’ things. I’m feeling guilty just because I am ‘thinking’ differently,” Mary Beth said. “I can just think about standing up for myself to my mom --- something simple like not taking charge of our Thanksgiving extravaganza --- and here comes the guilt. There’s no telling what it’s going to feel like if I actually speak the word ‘no’ to her.” Mary Beth laughed, but we both knew she was absolutely serious.

Mary Beth was not backsliding. She was just moving into some rough terrain on the road less traveled. She was beginning to encounter what my wife (an amazing therapist) calls “positive guilt.” Positive guilt occurs when we begin to break rules that need to be broken, when we become aware of dysfunctional programming from our past and we develop the audacity to think for ourselves. For any of us who learned to get our self-esteem chips from denying ourselves and taking care of everyone else, positive guilt sets in when we refuse some of those chips and decide instead to consider what --- here comes the blasphemy --- we want.

Positive guilt is like withdrawal pain for the addict. If I am an addict beginning to abstain from drugs, I will experience withdrawal physically and/or psychologically. For a while, the longer I refuse to use the drugs the withdrawal pain increases. The message of the withdrawal pain is simple: go back, go back where you were, where you came from, where you “belong.”

Positive guilt conveys the same message to us. “How dare you stray from the tradition of this long-standing script! How dare you consider your own needs and wants! How dare you think for yourself!” the positive guilt screams. And if that doesn’t work, it might tell us about how cruel we are and about how our “new and improved” behavior is going to hurt other people’s feelings. And of course, part of the program tells us that if something we do hurts someone else’s feelings then we are ----- bad.

I told Mary Beth about my wife's concept of positive guilt, and I told her that like the drug addict's withdrawal, it gets worse before it gets better.

"It's going to get worse?" she asked.

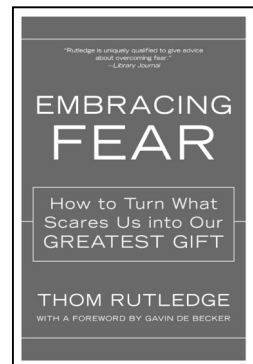
"Yes," I said, "but as long as you don't turn back, as long as you don't give into the addict's temptation to medicate the pain, it will get better ----- much, much better."

"Yeah, happy holidays to you too," Mary Beth said.

The Rules of Self-Care Apply to the Holidays Too

Thom Rutledge, author of *Embracing Fear*

No matter what progress we may have made in taking better care of ourselves in our day to day lives, we are in danger of leaving that progress behind when we pack for our holiday trips --- whether the trip is cross country or just across town. Consider the strange phenomenon of instant age regression when you step across the threshold of your parents' home. You may be 42 when you step onto the porch, but once inside the house your psyche automatically shrinks to 12. Or think about the certainty with which you feel that you "have to" be at a certain place, or with certain people, just because it is Thanksgiving or Christmas or Hanukah. You may have been successfully breaking the dysfunctional "have to" rules throughout the year, but when November comes, you suddenly, mysteriously find yourself standing on the all-too-familiar square one.



Well, consider this your reminder that practicing your healthy independence is just as important during the last two months of the year as it is for the first ten months. Take a few notes with you as you navigate the sometimes turbulent and tricky waters of family gatherings. (I suggested that metaphor to a client recently, and she said that going home for the holidays for her was like sailing into the Bermuda Triangle.) You don't have to have a Bermuda-Triangle-level of dysfunction in your family to benefit from a little refresher course. Put these reminders in your pocket, and/or write a list of your own.

- Remember that every day has only 24 hours --- no matter what you call it.
- Love them (family, friends, whoever), but don't take them personally.
- Break some family rules just for the fun of it.
- Keep a list of supportive friends' phone numbers with you ... and use them.
- Take a walk periodically by yourself, or with a relative you really like and feel comfortable with.
- When in doubt, say something bizarre. (Again, for the fun of it. For instance: proudly announce that you have 90 days clean in your Homicides Anonymous program.)

- If you really don't want to be somewhere, don't be. Check the birth date on your driver's license to remind yourself you are an adult. Make decisions based on what you think and feel, not what your family might think or feel.
- Write a brief holiday mission statement for yourself --- something like ...
"I will treat others with respect, starting with myself."
or
"I will enjoy myself by spending time with people I really want to be with."
- Add to this list, and share it with others in your support system.

Write a list of self-care holiday reminders and put them in your pocket.

THE HOLIDAY GRASS is often greener on the other side of the fence. Some people grumble about "having" to spend time with family while others are hurting because they don't have family to be with. Whatever your circumstances, remember to express gratitude for what you have, and look for opportunities to be of service to others. Have a peaceful and enjoyable holiday season.

Thom Rutledge, LCSW is the author of *Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift*. For more information visit <http://www.nutshellwisdom.com>.