

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I'm trying to lose weight but every time my mother visits (which is about once a week) she brings cookies or a pie she's baked. I try to nicely say, "No thank you," but she puts me on a guilt trip. "Oh, just try it. I worked all morning on this new recipe," she says as she shoves a tray of cookies at me. So then I eat a cookie or whatever and within ten minutes she's telling me I should go on a diet because I look fat. I can't win. What do you suggest?

-- On a Diet

Dear Diet,

Your mother is putting you in a kind of double-bind, one where you're damned if you do, damned if you don't.

You're right that you can't win as long as your mother is in control of this game. But you can refuse to play.

First of all, I'm assuming that you actually can stand to lose a few pounds, that you do not have some kind of out-of-kilter body image problem, or an eating disorder. If neither of those is true, then you have to stick to your own agenda about losing weight.

The next time your mom brings those sweets, very clearly – using your best assertive skills – tell her that you are dieting. You can tell her how delicious the cookies look, but you are counting on your will power to resist them.

If she continues to push, then you will have to talk about the process of what is happening. You'll have to meta-communicate ("meta" means "beyond") which means to talk about what you're talking about. Sound confusing? Here's what I mean.

Look your mother right in the eye and say, "Mom, you know I'm trying to lose some weight and yet you bring these calorie-rich cookies to me all the time. I try to say 'no' but then you tell me how hard you've worked to bake them. After I eat one, within a few minutes, you mention that I look fat. What is your intention? What's going on here?" Then be quiet and listen.

This level of honesty and directness will most likely disarm your mother. We're not used to talking about the *process* of our communication—the meaning and intent behind what we say -- so to do so, usually provokes a different kind of response.

Perhaps, this will truly be an eye-opening conversation with you mother. She might not be conscious of the bind she is putting you in, and pointing it out to her may put an end to such behavior in the future. Maybe she'll respect your desire to lose weight and make a nice non-fattening fruit tray for you instead.

On the other hand, she may deny that she is doing what you say she is doing. She may not respect your wishes, no matter how clearly you've expressed them. In that case, you have to (kindly and gently) stick to your guns. You'll know whether or not she really heard you by observing her future behavior. If she continues to bring you those calorie-pumping cookies, then you will have to again say, "No, thank you. Remember, I'm trying to lose weight." Then under no circumstances eat one. That puts the game back in play.

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Now, about this guilt trip you say your mother gives you. It helps to remember that no one can actually make you feel guilty. Oh sure, they can try but you have to be willing to accept guilt in order to feel bad.

Guilt has an appropriate place in healthy adjustment. If you've done something absolutely terrible, feelings of guilt will motivate you to think twice before you do that again.

Authentic guilt implies that you've done something wrong. I'm thinking here of being responsible for some kind of crime, hurting someone, or doing something against your own moral or ethical principles. Big stuff.

In these cases, we can repent and forgive ourselves. We can learn and grow from our authentic guilty feelings.

Inauthentic or false guilt is when we are hard on ourselves because we've made a mistake, when we hold perfectionistic standards that no one could ever achieve, or when we do not yield to what another powerful person wants from us.

(Q: "How many guilt-inducing people does it take to change a light bulb?" A: "None. I'll just sit here in the dark.")

Inauthentic guilt interferes with self-esteem and self-confidence and should be avoided.

Not wanting to partake of your mother's cookies doesn't qualify as a good reason to feel authentic guilt. Just say "no."

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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