The intercom at the Dallas/FortWorth airport blared, “Flight 599, Flight 599, this is the final boarding announcement for Flight 599, departing for Orlando.” Ella pushed her swollen feet back into her new black pumps, recently removed to help her make it through the new homeland security restraints. She grabbed her carry-on bag, minus the confiscated pointy tweezers, and hustled to make her flight.

She bumped and scooted her way through the warm, stale-smelling cabin to her cramped seat by the window. She put her carry-on bag in the overhead bin and settled herself. Whew! I made it. Thank God, I made it. There was not much Ella could do now, seeing as she was sequestered for the two-and-a-half-hour flight.

Sequestered. That sounded good: no e-mail, no phones, no laundry, and no guilt, right? Wrong. The ghost of guilt buckled up right next to her. In her feeble attempt to push the guilt aside, Ella mentally checked off her “keep-the-home-fires-burning” to-do list:
Meals prepared—check.
Laundry done—check.
Kissed husband and daughter good-bye—check.
Picked up clothes from the cleaners—check.
Planned kid transportation—check.

Now it was time to relax and enjoy the ride, right? Wrong again! Now it was time to focus on the presentation she was responsible for when the plane landed.

Ella was dealing with the difficulty of knowing that her seven-year-old daughter did not want her to leave—and neither did Ella. But she had no real choice. Ella was committed to an important opportunity, and she had to make the presentation. On the first evening of her business trip, Ella called home to say good night and could hear her daughter’s tears begin to flow. “Mommy, please come home. I need you,” Sarah pleaded.

This was tough. Fighting back her own tears, Ella promised to be home soon. After hanging up, she did what any respectable mother would do: she made a beeline for the vending machine down the hall. When the guilt begins taunting, sometimes chocolate softens the blow, but it won’t soothe the inner struggle.

The Guilt Trip

Are you packed for the infamous guilt trip? Of course you are. As a working mom, you’re no doubt loaded down with plenty of excess baggage for the journey. Guilt baggage comes standard with motherhood in a wide assortment of shades and sizes. Balancing work + marriage + financial needs + family + church +
extracurricular activities = guilt. Add your own variables to fit your personal equation. Ultimately life’s demands take an overwhelming toll on us, leaving us exhausted, overwhelmed, and burdened with a load of guilt.

What is the toll that guilt takes on our lives? Author Harriet Lerner explains in her book *The Mother Dance*, “Guilt keeps mothers narrowly focused on the question, ‘What’s wrong with me?’ and prevents us from becoming effective agents of personal and social change.” Needless to say, we could all fly a little higher if we weren’t weighed down by the heaviness of guilt.

So what do we do about it? Let’s take a brief trip down the road of understanding and relief to help us come to a practical place of peace in our hearts. We will examine three Ds along the way: discover, determine, and decide. We will discover the source of guilt, determine if the guilt is valid, and decide to respond instead of react. Ultimately, at the end of the road, each of us must be able to know in our hearts that we are in the place God wants us to be, for in that place we find peace and confidence.

In any battle, it is important to know who the enemy is and who it is not. The enemy is not our family, and the enemy is not our work. The enemy is the feeling of guilt, and it tends to play out through circumstances and people.

**Discover the Source of Guilt**

What presses your guilt button? Could it be when your child says, “Why do you always have to work late?” Or perhaps it’s one of those questions from your boss, like, “Your kid is sick again?
Wasn’t he sick last week?” The guilt button may be pushed when your son says, “You never have time to help me with my homework.”

The tough reality is you know he’s right, but there’s little you can do about it when you’re struggling just to finish your own workload.

Guilt can hit us from all sides. Even our pets can make us feel guilty for not giving them the attention they deserve! Guilt chips away at our consciences as we attempt to do the best we can at work and at home. With our natural bent to nurture others, women are especially gifted in the guilt game.

Whether our guilt is self-imposed or genuine, we must handle it in a healthy way. We can either demolish it or deal with it; but if we pretend it isn’t there and stuff it deep down inside, our guilt will eventually erupt like a volcano, spewing out anger, resentment, and frustration at everyone in our path. Been there? Most of us have at one time or another. It’s time to take our guilt and boldly face it head-on.

More than likely with your busy schedule, you have rarely taken time for introspection, and we’re guessing that one of the last things you want to do is speculate about your own guilt. So we’ve made the following guilt self-check as simple and pain-free as possible. Don’t belabor your responses; just take a few minutes to jot down the thoughts that immediately come to mind from the following questions.

You may feel guilty about leaving your children for your work and guilty about leaving your work for your children. You will no doubt also feel guilty about being guilty.

—Harriet Lerner
What circumstances in my life tend to make me feel guilty?
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________

If I’m going to be completely honest, the root of the guilt comes from
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________

I bring most of my guilt upon myself: Yes or No.

Certain people make me feel guilty: Yes or No.

If you circled “Yes,” then jot down why these people make you feel guilty:
___________________________________________________
___________________________________________________

After answering these questions, what can you say about your guilt? Does your guilt seem unfounded, or does it seem to be based on a solid problem or challenge? Did you identify certain people who make you feel guilty?

Take Rebecca, for instance. Her husband is the minister of a small church, and she works part-time as a nurse at the local hospital to help pay the bills. Several of the ladies in her husband’s congregation make occasional stinging comments about how Rebecca never
seems to be at home or that it’s such a shame that her kids have to be in day care.

After several guilt-ridden years, Rebecca finally began to recognize that her guilt stemmed from the ladies’ perceptions and assumptions. The truth is, Rebecca knew she was doing what was right for their family. She carried guilt that was heaped on her by other people.

Sometimes our guilt is not based on reality but rather on how people react to us. It is important to discover what makes us have those nagging feelings, because our first step toward fighting the enemy is recognizing it. As you answered the questions above, we hope you began to identify some of the sources of your guilt. Now let’s determine what to do with it.

**Determine If the Guilt Is Valid**

Are your thoughts self-defeating, or are they self-assuring? Are you beating a dead horse or mounting a mighty stallion in your thought processes? What we allow to roll around in our brains can lead us in a positive direction, but if we are laden with guilt, we can become discouraged and defeated. So how do we hold on to reality and dump out the negative garbage?

As you discovered your own personal guilt hot spots in the self-examination above, you took the first step toward fighting the battle of guilt. Often the root of guilt comes down to the more telling question: should I be working outside the home as a mother? In other words, am I in the right place and doing what I should be doing? Take a moment right now to honestly write
out the reasons you are working. It is important to get it out of your head and onto paper. Search your heart and be honest in your response.

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

After writing out your reasons for working, answer the following questions:

Am I firm in my resolve that I am doing what I need to be doing? Yes or No.

When I think about coming before God with my reasons for working, I know I am doing what He wants me to be doing. Yes or No or Not Quite Sure.

Is there something I could be doing differently (working part-time or in another place or profession) that would give me more flexibility to juggle the responsibilities of home? Yes or No.

If you circled “Yes,” write out several alternatives that come to mind.

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________
In all truthfulness, sometimes our feelings of guilt may actually be our consciences bothering us because we are doing something we should not be doing. We should not dismiss guilt altogether in our lives, because sometimes guilt points us in the direction we ought to go. If God is using those tugging feelings to gently nudge us toward obedience, then we would be wise to heed His call. Often we heap those feelings onto our own pile of thoughts, and we may find ourselves buried in our own false assumptions and guilt. As you answered the questions above, it is our hope that they lead you to find the truth for your own life.

Delete Self-Imposed Guilt with PDA

A good guide for gutting out self-imposed guilt is encompassed in the acronym PDA. If you're up on technology, you know that a PDA is a personal digital assistant—a small, handheld computer that keeps track of schedules, addresses, phone numbers, and much more. For our purposes, however, PDA stands for “pray, determine, ask.” Let’s take a look at each of these components that help us get rid of self-imposed guilt.

Pray

When you are burdened by guilt in making a career decision or a choice for a child's future, it is essential to ask for God's direction. Many times Satan will use the guise of guilt to cloud our thinking and to reduce our effectiveness. But prayer is our powerful tool to conform our will to God's in His perfect timing. God knows our capabilities and He knows the future, so defer to His leadership first.
We can go confidently before the throne of grace and ask God for His direction. The Bible tells us to ask boldly and confidently for wisdom from God: “If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking” (James 1:5).

Determine

If God has called you to work outside the home, then don’t waver. That’s where you should be. Ultimately we must answer to God for our actions. If we are living outside of His will, then guilt tends to be a natural consequence. If we know we are in the place we are supposed to be or have no other choice but to work, then guilt can be an unnecessary distraction and cause us pain we were never meant to bear.

As you pray for discernment and use the self-assessment provided in this chapter, you will most likely come to a solid place of knowing you are in God’s will. Now it’s time to determine that you will not allow those feelings of false guilt to dominate your thought life. Determine to reject the false negatives and hold on to the real positives.

What are the positives we should hold on to? Here are a few on which to dwell:

* You can be confident you are in God’s will.
* Difficulties help us (and our children) grow in strength and maturity.
* Your work is benefiting others (family income, the people at work, etc.).
Your children are learning to be less self-centered and more God-centered.

Your children are learning responsibility, independence, and a good work ethic.

Keep your eyes on the good things God can do through your work. Determine to dwell on these and dismiss the negative thoughts that creep in. The Bible tells us to keep our minds focused on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (see Philippians 4:8). Yes, there will be conflicts between work and family. Determine to work through these conflicts with God’s wisdom, strength, and peace.

Ask

Seek wise counsel and encouragement from other working mothers who walk in your same high heels. We need affirmation from each other as we walk this rocky road of life. We need accountability to those of like mind in order to finish strong. Ask. It seems simple, but asking for advice or help from others can be difficult, especially when we want to appear as though we have it all together. We need to remember that we are not islands unto ourselves. We benefit from the help of others. The Bible says, “Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).

Recently we met an older woman who had retired from working full-time at a power company in Dallas. She mentioned that
she felt it was her turn to give back to other businesswomen. Not only had she been a working mom, but her mother had also been a working mom. Now, as a grandmother, she felt it was time to use the wisdom and discernment God had given her to help other young working moms. She said she simply wanted to be a mentor with a few solutions to busy schedules and, more important, a large dose of loving encouragement.

Don’t hesitate to ask a friend to join you as you walk down this road. She may be your age or she may be older and may have already walked down the road before you. Either way, the journey of life is much smoother with a friend who understands.

Decide to Respond, Not React

“Late again,” Lauren said in her smug, thirteen-year-old tone. Sandy felt her blood pressure rising as the backlash spewed from her mouth. “You try working two jobs with angry customers and a jerk for a boss! It’s time you get off your little Princess Lauren throne and learn a little patience and respect!”

Oops! Often when our family members react negatively to our work/life conflict, we are tempted to lash out with an emotionally charged reaction instead of a healthy and healing response. When the emotional whining comes from our child or the blame flame is thrown from our teenager, let’s choose to handle the guilt wisely. Falling apart or lashing out will only add more guilt to our load. We can reduce the stress level for ourselves and for our family if we pause to evaluate the situation.
and then offer a compromise or a reasonable explanation. Speak in love, because what our children really want to know is that we care. It can be healing and helpful to tell them that we share their frustration and sadness and that we want to be with them.

It is good for our children and husbands to learn through experience that life doesn’t always turn out the way we want it to. We must do what we can to make the best of the situation and learn to accept the not-so-great parts of life. When your child is upset because there is a conflict between your work and something in his or her life, it is time to step back and evaluate. This becomes your chance to respond, not react.

First, consider whether your family member has a valid point. If you made an unwise decision, your child may be frustrated because he or she is paying the price by losing significant time with you. If that is the case, then you need to develop a workable compromise. For instance, if you are going to have to miss your daughter’s recital because of a business trip, then ask someone to videotape the recital and schedule a time when you will sit down with your child, eat popcorn, and watch the show together.

Apologize when necessary, recognizing that you do make a bad decision now and then. Don’t beat yourself up over the fact that you made an unwise move. You are human, just like everybody else. Help your family understand your mistake, ask for forgiveness when necessary, and move on. Your child will learn more about life when you apologize than if you try to act like you are perfect.

On the other hand, maybe your child is being unreasonable in expecting you to be there for all events at all times. You must evaluate if your child’s demand is excessive. It is important for our children to learn that we cannot be there for them 24-7. We
are not God, and it is not our job to hover over our children like helicopter moms. Our children learn and grow as a result of the tough bumps in life. If we are there to solve all of their problems, then when will they learn to make decisions on their own, ask for help when they need it, and most important, cry out to God for help? They learn independence and responsibility when we cannot be at their beck and call. This is not a bad thing.

Our response to unreasonable guilt should not be anger. We need to respond to our children with understanding about the root of their frustration, and we must tenderly teach them along life’s way. God’s Word reminds us to “put away all falsehood and ‘tell your neighbor the truth’ because we belong to each other. And ‘don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you,’ . . . for anger gives a mighty foothold to the Devil” (Ephesians 4:25–27).

Let’s just say your son left his lunch at home, and he lashes out at you when you arrive home that evening, blaming you for working and not being available to bring him his lunch. Instead of reacting by yelling back at him (which would be a huge temptation on any given hormonal day), respond with a teaching moment. “Jonathan, the reason you are angry is that you forgot your lunch and there was no one to cover your error. We all forget things now and then, so we have to compensate—to borrow food or money, or go hungry. We learn responsibility from our mistakes. I bet you won’t forget your lunch again.”

As we learn to respond to our children in love instead of reacting to them in guilt-driven anger, we begin to change the attitude in the home. Let’s face it: Mom usually sets the tone of the home. We have the power to build understanding and acceptance in our families, and we have the power to fuel anger and resentment.
Solomon said, “A wise woman builds her house; a foolish woman tears hers down with her own hands” (Proverbs 14:1). Let’s be builders of our homes by our positive responses to the darts of guilt.

Destination: Peace

Our goal is to come to a place of peace with ourselves and with God as to what we are doing and why. For some mothers, it comes down to the reality of financial need. Other mothers work because God has given them an ability, gift, or talent that they know God is leading them to use in the workplace. Who can determine if working outside the home is right for you and your family? We can’t answer that question for you. This is a question that must be answered between you and God.

As workingwomen, solid in our resolve, we realize we cannot do it all; so we accept our journey and learn to let go of the baggage. Often we put too much pressure on ourselves to achieve our own impossible image of what we think we were created to be. But our standards are often simply unreasonable. June Cleaver is not real. Martha Stewart has a staff of hundreds to help her create her domestic dynamics. Demi Moore is airbrushed and tweaked by photo imaging on the cover of Vogue. But often, we as working mothers think we must achieve this unreachable perfection in our everyday lives.

Shari Thurer, PhD, author of The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother, says, “Our current ideals of the perfect mom are based on fiction. Or at least not the reality of the 21st century.” Thurer adds that highly educated women are “espe-
cially prone to working mother guilt because they have been taught that there is a right and a wrong way to approach every situation, when in fact there are many good ways to raise a child.”

It’s easy to live with the ghost of guilt playing tricks on our minds and echoing the chant, “Need the income, but need to be there for my children. Need the challenge for myself, but need to give to my family too. Not a Type A personality, but live with Type A demands on me. Need to sleep, but need to work late and still have energy to make it through the day.”

We must dismiss the garbage and hold on to truth. Proverbs tells us, “A wise person is hungry for truth, while the fool feeds on trash” (Proverbs 15:14). Will we fill our minds with truth or trash? Our attitude really does determine our altitude, so let’s focus on the ways God is working through our circumstances, and let’s throw away false guilt once and for all.

All moms tend to live with a certain amount of guilt. We continually wonder if we could have done more, done better, or done less. Let’s face it: inside or outside the home, we are all working mothers. But positive moms throw away the picture of perfection and find freedom in following God’s plan for their lives. The key to peace is not in pleasing everyone or in fulfilling other people’s expectations of what a perfect mother ought to be. The key is seeking God’s will in all we do and allowing Him to direct our paths (see Proverbs 3:6).
God's Word tells us, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this” (Psalm 37:4–5 NIV). Our job is to delight in God, to trust Him, and to commit our lives to Him.

God’s plan for one woman is not the same as for another. We must walk the path He has set for us. We may struggle with guilt now and then, but we do not have to allow our feelings of guilt to strangle our God-given purpose. Let’s pack our bags for the land of peace and confidence and leave the guilt trip behind.
How Are You Coping with Stress?

How well do you sleep?

a. I fall asleep easily and wake refreshed.
b. I sometimes still feel tired in the morning.
c. I don’t usually sleep through the night.
d. I can’t stop thinking long enough to fall asleep.

Which answer best describes your attitude in the morning?

a. I am usually eager to meet the day.
b. It takes a few minutes to mentally prepare myself to meet the day ahead.
c. I have to psyche myself up to make it through another day.
d. I would rather go back to bed.

Which of these responses best describes your eating habits?

a. I consider my appetite to be fairly normal.
b. Lately, I find I eat more or less than normal.
c. I rarely sit down for a meal.
d. Food is a problem area for me.

How would you describe your physical condition?

a. I am basically healthy.
b. I have a few recurring ailments.
c. I seem to be ill much more often lately.
d. I never feel completely healthy.
Which best describes your thought process?
   a. I seem to think clearly most of the time.
   b. I need to stop and organize my thoughts periodically.
   c. I find it difficult to focus on any one thing.
   d. My thoughts are erratic, and my mind feels foggy.

Do you remember things well?
   a. My memory seems as good as ever.
   b. I forget things occasionally.
   c. I seem to require constant reminders.
   d. I can’t seem to remember anything lately.

How would you describe a normal day?
   a. I usually accomplish what I set out to do.
   b. My life is hectic, but I am still on top of it.
   c. Too much to do with too little time.
   d. I feel like I am drowning.

Which answer best describes your emotional state?
   a. I am normally on an even keel.
   b. My emotions are a bit unsettled but basically under control.
   c. My emotions are fairly unpredictable.
   d. My emotions are totally out of control.

When you think about tomorrow, do you
   a. Look forward to another day?
   b. Think about all you have to do?
   c. Find yourself getting anxious?
   d. Want to avoid it entirely?
the guilt factor

Would you describe yourself as peaceful?

a. Usually
b. Sometimes
c. Rarely
d. Never

Scoring: Add your points to find your score.

\[ a = 1 \text{ point} \]
\[ b = 2 \text{ points} \]
\[ c = 3 \text{ points} \]
\[ d = 4 \text{ points} \]

10–19: If you scored in this range, you are rare indeed! You deal extremely well with the demands of life and are probably seen by others as well-adjusted and in control.

20–30: If you scored in this range, life is hectic, but you are handling stress fairly well. Focus on what is truly important in life and make sure to keep your priorities in order. Slow down a little, breathe, and face one thing at a time.

31–40: If you scored in this range, your stress level is far too high. It’s time to stop and take stock of your life. Some major changes may be called for. High levels of stress can adversely affect your physical and mental health. You may want to speak with your doctor.
The Guilt Factor at a Glance

- Realize that the guilt is there.

- Develop strategies to counteract the guilt.

- Determine if there is anything you can do differently.

- Learn from the challenges.

- Working mothers are good role models.

- Thanks to our example, the next generation of adults will more comfortably combine career and family.

- Remember that your true employer is God.

- Recognize that God uses the rough spots to help you and your children grow.

- Pray and ask God's help and direction.

- Discern false guilt from the real thing.

- Call another working mother to get a clear perspective.

- Respond, but don’t react when others make you feel guilty.
the guilt factor

- Ask for forgiveness when necessary.

- Realize you can’t do it all.

- Identify whom you are trying to please.

- Know and live your priorities.

- Discover the root of the problem.

- Accentuate the positives; eliminate the negatives.

Delete Self-Imposed Guilt with PDA

P—Pray
D—Determine
A—Ask
If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking. But when you ask him, be sure that you really expect him to answer, for a doubtful mind is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. People like that should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. They can’t make up their minds. They waver back and forth in everything they do.

James 1:5–8

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.

Philippians 3:12–14

Do not fret or have any anxiety about anything, but in every circumstance and in everything, by prayer and petition (definite requests), with thanksgiving, continue to make your wants known to God. And God’s peace [shall be yours, that tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and being content with its earthly lot of whatever sort that is, that peace] which transcends all understanding shall garrison and mount guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. For the rest, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is worthy of reverence and is honorable and seemly, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely and lovable,
whatever is kind and winsome and gracious, if there is any virtue and excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on and weigh and take account of these things [fix your minds on them.]

**PHILIPPIANS 4:6–8 AMP**

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

**PHILIPPIANS 4:10–13 NIV**

If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone; everything is made new!

**2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 NCV**

So now, those who are in Christ Jesus are not judged guilty.

**ROMANS 8:1 NCV**

When you were spiritually dead because of your sins and because you were not free from the power of your sinful self, God made you alive with Christ, and he forgave all our sins. He canceled the debt, which listed all the rules we failed to follow. He took away that record with its rules and nailed it to the cross.

**COLOSSIANS 2:13–14 NCV**

I, I am the One who forgives all your sins, for my sake; I will not remember your sins.

**ISAIAH 43:25 NCV**