



Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Why do I feel guilty?

Guilt often plays a part in normal grieving. It seems to surface as one “reviews” the sequence of events leading up to and including the death of a loved one. This review process is natural. In fact, it is part of the healing process. But as one reviews, alternative choices and responses become apparent in hindsight. That’s when guilt can rear its head. Actually, there have been nine types of guilt identified in relation to the grieving process: *

Death Causation Guilt

Can occur whether the person was actually directly responsible for the death, or not at all responsible. The perception of responsibility is the driving factor.

Illness-Related Guilt

Focuses on the time period prior to and including the illness of a person who has died. Examples include: not believing the person was ill, not noticing symptoms that led to the illness and the death, saying or doing something negative during the illness, being angry at the person for being ill, etc.

Role Guilt

A role is an expected set of behaviors. When a person we care about dies, guilt may emerge concerning, “what I should have done with, or for,” this person (in relation to our role as parent, spouse, etc.).

If Only Guilt

Stems from the belief that the bereaved survivor could have done something to change the course of the illness and/or death. Much of it falls into the category of Magical Thinking (doing something, or failing to do something, that any reasonable person would say had no relationship to the death; but nonetheless, the person feels responsible for the death in some way).

Bereavement Services

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1 of 3

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Moral Guilt

Moral beliefs about how we should behave can derive from self, religious, or spiritual beliefs. Moral guilt involves looking back at our life and attempting to derive connections between our past (perceived) sins and the reasons for death.

- “This death is punishment for my past sin(s).”
- “This death is punishment for his past sin(s).”
- “This is punishment from God.”
- “My family is cursed.”

Survival Guilt

Guilt of outliving a loved one.

Grief Guilt

Not grieving “correctly.” For example, “I’m not _____ enough.” (Angry, sad, visiting the cemetery, feeling badly, dreaming about him/her, punishing myself and feeling guilty.)

Unmentionable Guilt

Guilt related to a secret too terrible to tell.

- Drug or alcohol use
- Criminal activity
- Emotional abuse
- Information about how the death really occurred, i.e. AIDS
- Dishonesty
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Infidelity

Recovery Guilt

Guilt related to getting better. It is concerned with the times in which the individual realizes that he or she is:

- Living life without their loved one.
- Feeling good about being alive.
- Experiencing pleasure without feeling guilty.
- Going through several minutes, or even hours, in the day without thinking about their loved one.
- Beginning a new relationship.

Remember, whatever you were doing when the death occurred, you were doing what you felt was the right thing to do at the time. Now, looking back, it is easy to say, "I should have done it another way." Watch yourself when you use the word "should." It indicates that you have a "rule" that you are attempting to force on yourself. In addition, remember:

- You can never "should have."
- You can only do something now or plan for the future.
- Let go of this rule.
- It is okay to feel guilty for a while, but ask yourself these important guilt questions:
- How long am I going to continue to "beat myself up?"
- When am I going to say, "I've suffered enough?"
- What would it take to lessen my guilt?
- What would it take to forgive myself?
- If my best friend were in this exact situation, what would I say?
- Can I treat myself as kindly as I would my best friend?

Set a date and begin to let go. This means that, if you are willing to work on letting go of your guilt, you will choose a date and continue to let yourself feel as much guilt as you wish until that date. From that point on, you would agree to stop any self-talk that includes self-references to guilt. Remember, guilt serves no useful purpose in the healing process. You can move beyond it.

**From A Guide to Understanding Guilt During Bereavement, Robert Baugher, 1996.*