



Guilt: If Only... What If?

When a loved one dies, many people experience feelings of guilt. We may blame ourselves for something we did or didn't do. This is common. However, some bereaved people become tortured by their feelings of guilt. Guilt is a strong emotion and is often magnified during this extremely vulnerable time.

Most bereaved people feel some degree of guilt. We all do and say things we later regret. When a loved one has died, we are reminded of those hurts and failings, of words we regret saying, incidents we'd like to forget and/or actions we'd like to take back. We consider every possible action that we could have taken or not taken to prevent the death.

Many times there are legitimate reasons for guilt that can result from lost opportunities within the relationship and mistakes we wish we could make up for. Often it isn't until after our loved one has died that we become aware of all the missed opportunities and the things we neglected to do.

Sometimes we shoulder responsibility for our loved one's death and blame ourselves for matters out of our control. Such guilt unrealistically assumes that if we hadn't done this or had done that, our loved one would not have died. This would be assuming an unreal power and control over life and death, which we just don't possess.

Often the bereaved feel helpless with their guilt because there is little that they can do to correct the situation. After all, you can't change the past. However, it is important for the bereaved to accept their guilt. It is unhealthy and even damaging to deny guilty feelings. Healthy guilt is acknowledged, experienced and accepted. Sometimes a trained professional can help us to do this. It may take great efforts, but it is worth such efforts because guilt that is unrecognized or unresolved for a long period may lead to years of unhappiness.

*Adapted from Hope for Bereaved,
Syracuse, NY*

Suggestions for Handling Guilt

- If you feel guilty, ask yourself what is specifically bothering you the most. Talk over your feelings of guilt with a trusted friend or professional.
- Remember you are human. No one is perfect. Accepting our imperfections helps us to work through our guilt.
- Realize that guilt is a normal part of grief and should ease with time.
- Forgive yourself and ask the forgiveness of your loved one.
- Guilt should not be glossed over nor pushed down. Talk about your guilt until you can let it go.
- Give yourself the opportunity to focus on your guilt: to admit it, to understand it. Remember the good times too. Your relationship was more than the final chapter of their life.
- Realize that sometimes you are powerless and that you cannot control everything that happens.
- Consider that your loved one would not want you to suffer with guilt.
- Try writing about your thoughts/feelings of guilt in a journal.
- Realize you cannot change the past, but you can make changes for the present. This can help you reclaim control and move past your guilt.
- If you feel now that you mishandled a particular situation in the past, try not to blame yourself. Take what you learned from your reaction to the situation as you go forward to try not to repeat cycles.
- Remember that there is not always an answer to "why" so do not place blame on yourself for things beyond your control.
- Be patient with yourself and remember you tried to do the best you could with what you knew at the time.
- If guilt is prolonged or hinders your recovery, seek professional counseling. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to talk about your feelings of guilt with those who have been trained to help.

Is It Normal To Feel So Angry?

Angry feelings are a normal and healthy response to the death of a loved one. Emotions such as anger are not right or wrong, they simply are. At times life hurts; and that hurt generates anger. We often see anger as the enemy, so we continue to deny it and the pressure continues to build. It is best to recognize and express this anger in constructive ways rather than to deny or repress it.

If we don't allow ourselves a healthy outlet, anger can accumulate. When we reach our capacity, we begin to spill over by turning our anger against ourselves as depression, apathy, guilt, withdrawal or low self-esteem. We may turn to excessive alcohol or drug use, smoking or eating. Anger may spill outwardly against other targets – our family, friends or co-workers. If we keep our anger inside or just below the surface we may experience constant tension. Unexpressed anger does not dissipate. It merely hides until it emerges in another form. Unrecognized anger may be suppressed for years. So much energy is required to keep the lid on. It is very tiring. Anger and hate drain us of energy.

Those who bottle up their rage often demonstrate irritability, emotional outbursts, fatigue, and lack of motivation.

Anger is often directed inward. We may be upset with ourselves over how we have handled our grief or related situations since the death.

Our anger may be directed at others: the ambulance crew, the funeral director, a nurse, a friend, another family member or other “intact” families who have not had a loved one die. It is important to recognize such anger. Often, we take it out on those that are closest to us. We are

not really angry with them. This is referred to as displaced anger.

For some people, anger may be directed at the deceased. You may feel abandoned by them. You may ask “How could you die and leave me?” Since that seems unreasonable, the very thought is suppressed. It is healthy to express such anger but be sure that you are with someone who is understanding and accepting of your need to verbalize the full impact of your anger.

Your anger may be directed at your faith. It is normal to question the things we thought we knew after someone dies. You may feel your loved one was robbed of future dreams. You may be angry that you were not given more time.

Another difficult type of anger to experience is anger towards the illness or medical system. You may just feel angry that your loved one has died. You may also be upset by the circumstances of their death and worry they may have suffered.

People vary in their expression of anger. Some people have a short fuse. Their anger may even become rage. They may carry their anger to dangerous extremes, some even seeking revenge. Others have great patience and are very slow to anger. Some just let their anger smolder. Still others may be someplace in the middle or go from one extreme to another. It may be difficult for some people to even recognize, much less express, their anger. It is important to respect these differences.

The following are suggestions for coping with anger:

- Anger must first be acknowledged. Then you can begin to recognize the triggers of your anger.

- It helps to deal with anger physically. Take a walk, go for a bike ride, use exercise equipment, work out or swim at a fitness club, tear up old magazines, punch a pillow or scream aloud when alone.
- Write about your anger in a journal or in letters you never have to send.
- Crying releases anger and frustration. It is ok to cry and is a natural reaction to anger. By listening to special music, looking at photos, visiting the cemetery or doing things that remind you of your loved one you may provoke tears. Engaging in these activities can be therapeutic.
- Talking will help you to understand the specific cause of your anger. It helps not to carry it alone.
- Deep breathing, meditation, and even counting to 100 can help muscles to relax and resolves the physical component of your anger.
- Become aware of the dangers and limitations of displaced anger. Be careful of spontaneous expressions of rage as it may make you angrier and do harm to yourself and others. It is critical to free yourself of anger in safe ways. Set limits so that no one is hurt.
- Consider counseling if your anger continues.



Keeping A Personal Journal

Working through the grief process must be done by each of us in our own unique way. Many times talking to a trusted and compassionate listener is an effective way to release and resolve feelings of loss and grief. However, there may be times when it is difficult to verbalize your feelings or they feel too private to share. Writing down your thoughts can be helpful.

Journaling can help you clarify where you have been, where you are now and where you hope to be in the future. Putting your thoughts, memories, concerns and needs on paper may help you measure your progress in your grief journey. Over time, it can also help you to look back and realize that the pain and sorrow are lifting.

Once you record your ideas on paper you do not have to worry about losing them. Writing makes “room” for new avenues of thinking that you may not have had time to consider previously.

Remember, your journal is private! You are the only one who needs to see it.

With a notebook in hand, choose one or several of the following approaches:

- Write a letter to the person who died, expressing your thoughts and feelings about the following issues:
 - A special memory with you
 - What I miss the most about you and our relationship
 - What I wish I'd said or hadn't said
 - What I'd like to ask you
 - What I wish we had done
 - What I've had the hardest time dealing with
 - Ways in which you will continue to live on in me
 - Special ways I have for keeping my memories of you alive
 - You can also chose to include narrative written material about your own thoughts, feelings, and observations.



- You can also chose to include narrative written material about your own thoughts, feelings, and observations.
- You may want to include drawings or other visual materials, that are useful in clarifying or expressing your ideas. You can also include pictures from magazines or newspapers which capture the thought or image you are writing about and meaningful quotations you may have read or heard.

In time you will find that writing can provide an effective way to bring about resolution to difficult emotions and repetitive thoughts.

*Grief comes in one size, Extra Large.
If we tuck it away in the bottom drawer
where it never sees the light of day,
it remains exactly the same.
On the other hand,
if we wear it, feel it, talk about it,
and share it with others,
it is likely that it will become faded, shrunk and worn,
or will simply no longer fit.
When grief has served its purpose,
we are able to recognize the many gifts we have gained.*

~ Dianne Arcangel



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