



Guilt & Grief: Giving Yourself Mercy When You Feel You Are To Blame

By Heather Stang, MA, C-IAYT

Posted: April 18, 2018; Updated: April 19, 2020

Guilt and grief form a ubiquitous pair. We can find countless ways to blame ourselves. For that last argument we had. For not insisting they visit the doctor sooner. For sending them on that last errand. For not discovering the right healing supplement. For not being able to cure their addiction or ease the pain of mental illness.

When we grieve we often find ourselves on trial for all the things we should have said and done. And while blame can come from others, more often than not we are our own judge, jury, and executioner in the court of guilt. Things are black and white—there is no room for grey.

Why We Feel Guilt When We Are Grieving

I have sat with countless innocent people struggling with the feeling of grief-related guilt. Parents whose child has overdosed, spouses with a partner consumed by cancer, the sibling without the congenital heart disease, children whose parent suffered from Alzheimer's, the friend who recognized the signs only in hindsight, just to name a few.

In all cases these people acted lovingly, selflessly, even heroically. But what is it about the human experience of loss that leaves us feeling we could have done more? Why do so many of us experience overwhelming guilt when rationally we know we are not to blame?

Creating Order Out of Chaos

One hypothesis is that we feel guilt because we are trying to make sense of an unpredictable world. Our mind wants desperately to create order from the chaos. On any normal day, we buy into our assumptive world, believing that those who we sit down to dinner with tonight will be there tomorrow. Death shatters that worldview.

Our mind can trick us into believing that we have the power to prevent the next person we love from dying—if we can just figure out what we did wrong. The problem is that unless we are truly culpable, as in the case of premeditated homicide, our actions did not actually lead to the loss. Grief-related guilt can feel like it is helping us to reconstruct our assumptive world, even as it simultaneously feeds our false sense of control.

The Negativity Bias of Memory & Guilt

Of course there are a handful of cases where we might be culpable for a death, as in premeditated homicide. But for most of us, we have regrets. Human relationships are complex. The more time we spend with someone, the more likely it is that we will have some sort of conflict. Once they are gone, it is natural to look to the past and see countless moments in which we could have been kinder, more compassionate, more helpful.

The human brain is wired to put more emphasis on prior negative experiences than positive ones. This is called the “negativity bias of memory.” In his groundbreaking book, *Buddha’s Brain*, neuroscientist Rick Hansen explains that the negativity bias is a biologically adaptive response, key to our survival as a species:

But here’s the problem: your brain preferentially scans for, registers, stores, recalls, and reacts to unpleasant experiences; as we’ve said, it’s like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. Consequently, even when positive experiences outnumber negative ones, the pile of negative implicit memories naturally grows faster. Then the background feeling of what it feels like to be you can become undeservedly glum and pessimistic. (Hansen, Buddha’s Brain, p. 61).

My Guilt, Grief & Magical Thinking

When my stepfather returned home after surgery to have a fatty lump growing near his heart removed, I was tasked with delivering his medication and lunch to him (three milkshakes, two hamburgers, and a large order of fries. No kidding.). I stopped off at the Hood College library to pick up an audiobook (*Animal Farm*). I didn’t want to be bored during what I expected to be a long and exhausting week of commuting and caregiving.

He always had an ambulance in his driveway because he was converting it into a mobile darkroom. But as I turned into his drive, there were two. One had its lights flashing. I abandoned my car halfway up the drive and off to the side and ran up the hill to the house. I was too late. He died from a pulmonary embolism just minutes before. While they had not pronounced him yet, I knew.

*The guilt didn’t hit right away, but when it did it was lingering and relentless.
If I hadn’t stopped at the library, he would still be alive.
If I didn’t feel inconvenienced about driving to the middle of nowhere, he would still be alive.
If I had driven a different route he would still be alive.
If I had told him not to have this surgery, he would still be alive.
If I had convinced him to eat healthier and exercise, he would still be alive.*

My magical thinking insisted that I had the power to keep him alive, though my nursing friends assured me that if a pulmonary embolism is going to happen, it is going to happen. But I felt I had failed.

Self-Compassion as a Response to Guilt

It is hard to think your way out of a feeling. Often impossible. But sometimes you can feel your way through. If objective reflection does not assuage your guilt, self-compassion may offer you the spaciousness you deserve.

In her book, *Self Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, Kristen Neff explains that there are three components to self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. The practice below helps you find a way to be kind to yourself without asking you to change how you feel. It also invites you to recognize that you are not alone in your feelings of guilt.

Mercy Meditation for Grief-Related Guilt

Mercy is the act of showing compassion to someone who we have power over. There is no one we have more control over than ourselves.

Preparation

1. Find a place to sit or lie down where you can be alone and where you feel safe. If it feels right, wrap yourself in your favorite blanket, or snuggle up with your favorite pillow. These creature comforts are a symbol that you are about to embark on a practice of self-care and kindness.
2. Close your eyes, or gaze softly at a candle, flower, art or other object, or you can focus softly on the wall or the floor.
3. To whatever extent it is possibly, consciously relax any part of your body that is holding tension. If your body won't relax, don't fight it, and let it be.
4. Place your hand over your heart and begin to notice the natural rise and fall of your breath.
5. Starting with the number 59, start to count backwards each time you exhale. When you lose track of your number, just start somewhere close by.
6. When you feel your mind has become steadier from counting your breath, let go of the numbers, and simply notice each inhale and exhale for a few more breaths.
7. Notice the spaciousness of your breath.

Practice

1. On the next inhale inhale, imagine that you are breathing in mercy for the part of you that is feeling shame or guilt. You may also choose to put this intention into words, silently saying "May I have mercy on myself," "May I be released from this suffering," or any other words that bring you comfort.
2. Repeat on each inhale until you feel ready to share this compassion with others.
3. Continue practicing for yourself on each inhale, while on each exhale you offer the same mercy or words to other bereaved people in the world who may be feeling guilty. This may be very specific to your situation, such as sending out mercy to all mothers feeling guilty over the death of their child. Notice that while your experience is special, and your relationship unique, there are other people in the world sharing the experience of guilt or self-blame.
4. Remind yourself that you are not alone.
5. When you are ready to end the practice, take a moment to thank yourself for offering yourself and others this kindness. Then continue to be as kind as you can be to yourself for the duration.

Eight and a half years later, I still have moments when I reflect on things I could have done differently on the day my stepfather died, and the years prior. But I no longer feel like my actions caused him to die. We had a complex relationship. It wasn't perfect, but it was sweet in its own way.

Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness have each helped me come to terms with my own set of shoulda, woulda, couldas. And I now embody the sense that most of what I did for Tom was kind. My hope is that you can experience this for your loved one, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Heather Stang, M.A. is the author of *Mindfulness & Grief*. She holds a Masters degree in Thanatology (Death, Dying, and Bereavement) from Hood College in Maryland, and is a certified Yoga Therapist. She is on the Advisory Board for the highly regarded military family survivor organization Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and is a faculty member of the Portland Institute of Loss & Transition, founded by Dr. Robert A. Neimeyer. She is also the host of the Mindfulness & Grief Podcast, founder of the Mindfulness & Grief Institute and the Frederick Meditation Center in Maryland.