

## Grief and Guilt

*(from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement)*

Experiencing feelings of guilt is very common when grieving. We beat ourselves up over the 'should haves', drown in the 'what ifs' and 'if onlys', and grapple desperately with the unanswerable 'why?'

Some people feel guilty that they weren't able to save or prevent the death of their loved one, or that they survived when their loved one did not. Others feel guilty that they didn't say the things they needed to say, that they weren't as close as they should have been, or that they failed their loved one in some way.

It's important to understand that whilst difficult, guilt is a very normal grief response, and will be experienced by most grieving people in some shape or form.

### What guilt can look like

Guilt can manifest in many ways. It can bring sadness, regret, shame, doubt, heaviness and anxiety, as well as feelings of failure, inadequacy and unworthiness. It can also impact on our physical health.

Guilt isn't always logical, or satisfied with reasonable explanations. Often grieving people say they know their guilt isn't rational but this doesn't make the feelings go away.

We are born with a full range of emotions, and often guilt is labelled as a 'negative emotion' along with anger, sadness, shame etc. Negative emotions can coexist with positive ones, however, and it's this balance that makes the negative emotions bearable. Guilt is a perfectly healthy emotion, provided it is not being avoided, suppressed, or transferred onto those around you (e.g. blaming and shaming).

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### The tyranny of 'shoulds'

'I should have been there', 'I could have saved them', 'I ought to have said something', 'I should have visited more', 'If only I'd told them I loved them'... with thoughts like these whirling uncontrollably through our heads, our guilt can easily grow and become seemingly impossible to manage.

"That we cannot change the past is a harsh and difficult reality to face" says Susan Meyerink, Bereavement Counsellor at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. "After the death of a loved one, those left behind often become consumed by the 'should haves' – the things that they can't change, but wish so desperately that they could."

### The blame game

It's amazing how readily we can find a way to blame ourselves for the death of loved one – even when we weren't there e.g. 'if I had been there, this never would have happened'. Sometimes we try to expunge our feelings of guilt by blaming others e.g. 'it was the doctor's fault' or 'they should have noticed something was wrong'. We can even go as far as to start blaming our loved one, e.g. 'they were a bad partner', 'they should have been more careful'.

In some cases, we can be partially to blame for the occurrence of someone's death, complicating guilt even further. It can help though to consider your intention. Did you intend for this to happen? Chances are the answer here is no, because people

who intentionally seek to hurt/kill someone are usually unable to experience guilt in the first place.

Ultimately, placing blame, whether justified or unjustified, on others, or yourself, is not going to fix things. It won't magically dissolve the guilt, it won't make you instantly feel better and ultimately, it won't bring them back.

### **Relationships and 'unfinished business'**

It is normal in relationships to unintentionally hurt someone. Unfortunately when that person is no longer with us, it is all too easy to go back to, and dwell on past incidents where there's been hurt, rather than remembering the good times.

Some people feel guilty following a death because they were not close to the person who died. Society expects us to grieve certain losses heavily, for example, the loss of a sibling or parent. The reality is though, that not everyone has a close relationship with their family and it's unrealistic to expect you would grieve the loss of someone you were ambivalent toward, or disliked, to the same extent you would a loved one.

### **It's OK to feel good**

When we are consumed by our grief, it can often come as a shock when we feel happiness or laugh for the first time. It is very common for the bereaved to feel a wave of guilt when this happens: e.g. 'How can I be feeling happy when they aren't here?' "Feeling happy does not equate to forgetting," says Susan. "Try to keep in mind that happiness and sadness can coexist. It doesn't have to be an 'either/or', it can be an 'and'."

### **How do I make these feelings stop?**

Whilst guilt isn't something we can necessarily just 'get rid of', what we can do, is acknowledge that it's OK for it to be there. Normalising these feelings, and accepting that it's OK to have them, is perhaps the

first step in starting to move towards a place where things can become bearable again.

With guilt there isn't a simple on/off switch, and like grief itself, there is no timeline for how long we will carry feelings of guilt. Below however, are some tips that may help you to manage and tolerate your guilt.

### **Tips for managing your guilt**

- Recognise that you are human. Nobody is perfect, and we all make mistakes and have regrets.
- Normalise your guilt: The more you make your feelings of guilt 'wrong' the longer they will stay. Try to work with your guilt, rather than against it.
- Consider: If your loved one were still here – what would they say to you about how you are feeling?
- What would you say to a friend who was feeling this way? Can you say that to yourself?
- Try to remember the good memories, as well as the hard ones.
- Ask your loved one for forgiveness, either out loud, in your mind or on paper. You won't receive an answer, but the process of asking can be healing.
- Talk to a close friend, family member or a counsellor about how you are feeling. Saying things out loud and talking them through can go a long way to helping us process and work through our emotions.

### **Seeking help**

"If your guilt is disturbing your ability to function, then it is important that you seek further help," says Susan. "Talking to friends and family, or seeking help from a counsellor or health professional can ease the burden of guilt, and help you to begin to accept and work with it. Remember, guilt is a very normal grief reaction. Don't be afraid of people judging you, because chances are, nobody is going to judge you as harshly as you are judging yourself."