

# Guilt



Guilt can be an uncomfortable emotion that people experience when they believe (correctly or not) that they are responsible for something bad that happened. It is very common for bereaved people to feel guilt after a death. And, it is important to remember that children and adults experience guilt differently and for different reasons. If you aren't sure if you or your children are experiencing guilt, try to notice if your thoughts start with "If only...", "What if...", "I should have...", or "It's my fault...". Although putting a name to your emotion will not take away the guilt or the pain, it may be comforting to be able to identify your feelings and to know that guilt is a common reaction after the death of a loved one.

Children are typically preoccupied with three major questions after the death of a loved one. Is it my fault? Is something bad going to happen to me? Is someone looking out for my safety? It is even common for younger children to think that they caused the death because of a thought they had or because they said or did something. Here are some tips on how to help your children work through any feelings of guilt they may be experiencing.

- **Listen and observe.** Children may have a hard time articulating their feelings and thoughts, and instead may express themselves through action. This is completely normal. Observe your children for any changes in their play since the death.
- **Offer reassurance.** It is helpful for children to be reassured by their primary caregivers that they are not responsible for the death. Explain to your children that nothing they did or could have done had an effect on the loved one's death. Remind them how much the deceased person loved them.
- **Have open conversations.** During this time, honesty is the best policy. Because children may not be forthcoming in sharing their feelings, it can be helpful to provide a safe space that allows your children to gather their thoughts. Try setting a time for a weekly family discussion.
- **Boost self-esteem.** Building your children's self-esteem is a helpful way to strengthen their ability to manage any thoughts of guilt. Giving genuine praise, modeling behavior by example, and demonstrating your love and affection are all actions that help raise self-esteem in children.
- **Seek support.** Sometimes children need extra help and being in a support group with peers may be helpful. While deepening the familial bond is important, it can also be beneficial for children to receive support from other children their age who have had similar experiences.

Adults often struggle with guilt, too. Consider these additional approaches to processing your own feelings of guilt.

- **Identify your feelings.** Listen to your thoughts and pay attention to the feelings that arise. It may be helpful to write down your thoughts and feelings. Keeping a journal can help you identify their intensity and frequency. Once you have pinpointed any guilty thoughts or feelings, you can start addressing them with close friends, a support group, a counselor, or a therapist.
- **Check the facts.** They say "hindsight is 20/20", which can unfortunately make for harsh self-criticisms. Try to keep this in mind when you find yourself ruminating over actions you wish you had taken. It may be helpful to consciously notice the thought or event that triggers your guilt. Make a list of the assumptions you are making about that thought or event and then determine whether the guilt matches the facts of the situation or just your assumptions.
- **Validate yourself.** Be honest about your feelings. There is no need to "be strong". Allow yourself the opportunity to experience your feelings without judgement. Validating your emotions does not mean you are excusing yourself from any responsibility. It simply means you are acknowledging your feelings and the difficult situation in which you find yourself.
- **Practice forgiveness.** Practice forgiveness by finding one small thing each day that you can forgive. Write a letter to your loved one and let out everything that needs to be said in order to find forgiveness. Sharing your forgiveness experiences with others may also help you move forward.





- **Give yourself a break.** Guilt is a heavy burden to bear. Sometimes a break from your thoughts is needed. You can give yourself this break by participating in activities that bring you peace or satisfaction. This can include going on a run, swimming, writing, or gardening—anything as long as it is active so as to release some of your stress. Set realistic expectations, though, and be patient knowing that you may not immediately want to be active.
- **Be gentle towards yourself.** If you are having a hard time with self-compassion, try treating yourself as you would your best friend or partner. Would you be critical and harsh, or would you be gentle, compassionate, and empathetic? Practice looking at yourself through someone else's eyes.
- **Know that you are not alone.** If you find yourself isolating and withdrawing from your community, consider joining a support group. Talking to others who will just listen can provide powerful relief. If you do not feel comfortable sharing with others, do not force it. You may find journaling to be more helpful. Remember, your grief journey is unique and individual to you.
- **Look at the whole picture.** If you find that you cannot let go of your guilt despite knowing there is nothing you could have done differently, try to look at it from a different perspective. Make a list of all your regrets and a separate list of all the ways you have grown from those corresponding regrets. Keep the second list nearby as a reminder of how you can change the way you look at things. Alternatively, any time you notice a guilty thought, pair it with two positive thoughts about the same memory.
- **Find meaning.** Getting involved in a cause or turning the deceased's death into something meaningful or purposeful may help you to relieve your feelings of guilt. Are there ways that you can help others based on your experience? For example, some families help raise money to fund research to find a cure for the type of illness that caused the death of their loved one. Sometimes putting energy toward helping others can be helpful in your own healing.

## Further Reading:

- *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margaret M. Holmes
- *Mindfulness for Prolonged Grief* by Sameet M. Kumar, Ph.D.
- *The Phoenix Phenomenon* by Joanne T. Jozelfowski
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart* by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.

## References:

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- How can I deal with the feeling of guilt after my spouse's death? HOPE Connection. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2015, from <http://hopegroups.org/about-us/faq/>
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