

# GUILT—IT'S WHAT OUR BRAIN DOES

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**After your loved one died . . .** did you find yourself saying things such as: I should've, I shouldn't have, if only, I wish I would've, or why didn't I? If so, you are part of a very large group of humans who have felt guilty following a death.

It doesn't matter whether the death took place thousands of miles away or in your home. It matters less whether your loved one died in an accident, in a war setting, or due to an internal war. What matters is that this precious person is no longer in your life.

You awaken each day with the harsh realization that the worst has happened. Your future looks uncertain. Those around try to help, but your grief is a dizzying array of emotions and thoughts. And one of the most common emotions of grief is guilt.

As we examine this grief reaction, the most important fact to keep in mind is that guilt is a feeling. You cannot talk someone out of a feeling. That's why, when people say, "Don't feel guilty," we don't respond with, "Okay, thanks. I feel much better now."

**Let's look at types of guilt and suggestions for coping with it. See if any of these apply to you.**

## TYPES OF GUILT

- ◆ **Survivor guilt:** You feel guilty because you are alive and your loved one is not. Or you think it should have been you who died instead of your loved one.
- ◆ **Benefit guilt:** Did money come to you following the death? If you feel received any sort of benefit, guilt will raise its financial head.
- ◆ **Role-failure guilt:** You look back on your life and feel bad because you weren't a good enough spouse/parent/sibling/grandparent/friend/relative. When a death occurs, your brain goes back into the past and reviews all the events and interactions with the person who died. It's easy to dwell on all the past wrongs.

- ◆ **Death-causation guilt:** Although you didn't directly cause the death, you may have felt that you should have or could have done something—anything—to prevent the death. If so, you are experiencing death-causation guilt.
- ◆ **Grief guilt:** Have you somehow felt that you weren't grieving right: crying enough, angry enough, sad enough, tough enough? Or perhaps you felt that you were crying too much or overly angry or too depressed or weak. Remember, you grieve however you grieve. There is absolutely no right or wrong way.
- ◆ **Moving-on guilt:** Have you laughed again? Done things for pleasure? Gotten involved in new activities? Have you felt guilty about it? This is one of the most significant challenges in coping with a death. After someone we love dies, we still get out of bed (even though we may not feel like it). Time keeps moving and suddenly it's a month. You know when it's been exactly a month because that date has been forever etched in your brain. Months turn into years and you realize that you have no choice but to live your life, even though it's not the one you wanted. Time has forced you to move on. You realize that moving on does not mean forgetting. You will never forget the life this wonderful person lived. But time has moved you forward and guilt arises.

## COPING WITH GUILT

Let's look next at some suggestions for coping with guilt. These suggestions came from bereaved people themselves. For my book *Understanding Guilt During Bereavement*, I asked many people what helped them in coping with guilt following the death of their loved one. Here is what they said:

- ◆ **Educate yourself.** By reading this article you have taken a step toward making a little more sense of your guilt.
- ◆ **Watch your self-talk.** For a time go ahead and beat yourself up with the should have and if only thoughts. But pick a date in the future, such as the birthday of your loved one and make a decision to cease using these negative terms. When you start to say, "I should've" catch yourself by saying, "Okay, stop this kind of talk." Consider it a gift from your loved one.
- ◆ **Compile memories.** Write stories or record them on a voice recorder or video. It can be called "I remember the time when..." Contact friends and relatives to ask them for stories, pictures, and videos of your loved one.
- ◆ **Forgive yourself.** At various times during the week, ask yourself, "What would it take for me to begin to forgive myself?"
- ◆ **Write a list** of all you did wrong and all you did right. It is important to get all the things you feel guilty about out of your head and onto paper. It's easy to beat yourself up for the negatives, but you also need to look at the positives.

- ◆ **Perform a guilt ritual.** In a workshop I presented at the TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors) conference for families whose loved one died in the military, I passed out small, polished rocks to each participant, telling them it was their guilt rock. They were to take it home and, as time went by and they began to feel less guilt, they moved the rock further away until they could finally throw it away. Another example of a guilt ritual was shared by a TAPS mother whose support group used a guilt candle. She thought about the guilt she felt for letting her son join the military, and when she blew out the candle, it felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.
- ◆ **Find individual or group support.** If you have found that your guilt and your grief are interfering with your ability to work on your activities of daily living, finding a counselor who understands grief and loss may help. Some people have discovered that a support group, such as TAPS, where people share feelings of grief and suggestions for coping with it, has been the best thing they've done for themselves since the death occurred. Many people have said to me, "Bob, without TAPS, I don't know where I'd be today. It saved my life."
- ◆ **Create a chat with your loved one.** This is an exercise some people find difficult to do. Put down this magazine for a minute and do the following: imagine that your loved one is going to visit you for twenty seconds and say something to you about all the guilt you've been feeling since the death. Imagine that this person is standing in front of you. Listen. Go ahead, do this now. What words do you hear? Next, take out a pen and paper and write down those words. Understand that these words are a gift that this person has given to you. Accept the gift.
- ◆ **Channel your guilt.** One way people cope with the guilt and anger over the death of a loved one is to channel it into a worthwhile project. Ask yourself, "What can I do now to help others in the name of my loved one?"

Guilt is a natural reaction to a significant loss. As the years go on, you may find that guilt may still pay you a visit. Guilt feelings are our brain's way of attempting to make sense of something that defies logic.

I hope you will find something in this article to give you insight into the types of guilt and tools for coping with it. I wish you a life filled with little guilt and many positive memories of the life this person lived.