

Coping with Guilt

Free yourself from blame for what can't be changed

The widower laments, "I didn't pay attention when she told me she was not feeling well. She went through her illness alone."

The young accountant speculates that planning a trip with her older sister would have given her something to look forward to; that she wouldn't have given up.

The child believes that his wishing mommy dead during a fit of anger caused mommy to die.

The mother of three regrets the complaints she made about her husband's selfishness prior to his sudden death.

A grandfather feels that by not taking his granddaughter to a different hospital, he caused her death.

Guilt is one of the most powerful negative reactions to the loss of a loved one, equaled only by anger as a common grief experience. After someone close to us dies, we think back to events, conversations, or modes of behavior we engaged in before the death. We examine the way in which we believe we played a vital role in that person's final decline, accident, or illness. Often, we assume responsibility for the death, which can range from thinking we were unkind or unhelpful to thinking we actually caused the death.

Regardless of how or why our loved one died, we sift through the evidence of past behavior, giving ourselves reasons to be miserable. We become tormented by our own perceived failures, omissions, insults, poor judgment, or unwise choices.

But the fact is that very few of us have a legitimate reason for feeling any significant guilt at all. When someone dies, our world is in disarray, and our lives suddenly seem unpredictable. Our reality is turned upside down. By feeling guilty, we give ourselves a sense of having control over

the situation. If we can assume guilt for the death, then we can impose some order on chaos. We create cause and effect, saying to ourselves, "Because I did this, then this happened." But these self-inflicted emotional wounds plunge us even further into despair. What can we do to relieve ourselves from the torment of these self-accusations?

There are several ways to cope effectively with guilt.

Apologize to your loved one. One of the ways to release guilt is to talk it over with the person to whom it is linked—even though your loved one is not here. Visualize your loved one sitting with you, or speak to your loved one's photograph. Talk openly from your heart. Be specific about the action or omission or other reason for your guilt. Talk about why you did or didn't do the thing that now causes your pain. Explain how it makes you feel now and how you would change it if you got a chance. Then ask for forgiveness.

For several days, repeat this process. Spend as much time as necessary to describe the reason for your guilt and to convey the depth of your remorse. It's OK if you begin to cry and can't finish what you're saying. You can always take a break and start over again.

Listen. Once you're comfortable with this process, add another step: After you have had your talk, close your eyes and think about what your loved one would say to you about what he or she has heard. Write down the response. If you have been forgiven, let those words bolster you and make self-forgiveness possible. If you are unsure about whether you've been forgiven, write what you would like to hear and why.

Seek a new perspective. Have a talk with a professional counselor, member of the clergy, or another reliable resource. Discuss the forgiveness you need and the reason it is so important to you. Take with you the note you wrote, describing what you need to "hear" from your loved one and why. As you talk over the situation, allow yourself to consider new perspectives on the situation that are offered to you. You may need to accept the idea that your guilt is completely unfounded or that it is a substitute for some other painful feeling.

Look at the whole picture. Recognize that no relationship is all bad or all good. List the things for which you will never feel guilt--ways in which you gave, supported, expressed affection or appreciation, or otherwise enhanced your loved one's life.

When you find yourself beginning to be swept into the gulf of familiar guilt, take out your list. Don't just read the words, visualize the whole context for each listed action. For example, if you wrote, "I tried to help her have confidence in herself," see yourself and your loved one interacting in a specific situation in which you lent her your support. Continue using the same procedure for each item you've listed. Realize that this list represents the reality of your relationship.

Set a no-guilt deadline. If your guilt still plagues you on a daily basis after releasing it through talking and focusing on the aspects of the relationship that were purely positive, consider selecting a date in the future when you will stop self-punishing thoughts. Have a truce with yourself set for that day. Say, "I've relived the reason for my guilt over and over. I could not have more regret over my actions. Now it is time to forgive myself and stop. On (date) I will no longer blame myself." Your personal deadline may be your loved one's birthday, the anniversary of her death, New Year's Day, your own birthday, or any day that has particular significance to you.

Redirect guilt. Many survivors have found relief from guilt by directing that same energy and time to a project that is an outgrowth of their personal loss. This may mean helping increase awareness about something such as teenage drunk-driving or the need for organ donors. It may also involve creating a new endeavor that memorializes the loved one in a particularly original and constructive way.

Finally, remember always that most of us accuse ourselves unnecessarily and without good logic. Show yourself the same kind of understanding and forgiveness you would show a close friend or relative. Realize that by living within the cell block of your own guilt, you're creating a jail for your

mind. You wouldn't think it reasonable for someone else to punish himself in this way, so don't give yourself permission to do it. Free yourself for the softer, kinder emotions of loss, and you'll find your days opening up to embrace the love and positive memories you shared.

Anger: Grief's Irate Companion

Blame and hostility can be barriers to dealing with feelings of loss

A recently widowed friend told me, with some amazement, about an experience she had when she went to do an errand. Forced to drive at a crawl in heavy traffic, she noticed a group forming around two street people, men who were loudly accusing each other of stealing personal possessions. She watched as the two, both hulking in size, went into a boxer's crouch, put up their fists, and taunted one another.

She told me that she said to herself, "That's it. That's for me." She got out of her car and walked over to where the crowd was gathered. She stepped between the two men and stood there, looking first one and then the other in the eye. Surprised to see a short, unflinching, sixtyish woman in their midst, they dropped their menacing postures. She returned to her car and continued down the street.

"What were you thinking?" I asked, amused by the image of my normally reasonable friend imposing herself into such a potentially explosive situation. "I was thinking that their anger was big enough to match mine," she told me. "It matched the way I felt inside. So I just went and stood there, sort of trying out my anger against theirs, I guess. And mine won."

Though most grieving people do not take such unusual steps, many relate actions stemming from their anger--the mourning father who chopped down a tree, the widow who berated a waiter at the dinner following a memorial, the widower who wrote a condemning letter to a no-show at his wife's funeral.

Often, people whose lives have been largely devoid of anger may find

themselves irritable, intolerant, or even raging. The anger we experience as survivors can seem uncontrollable, coming out suddenly at odd times. Or it can accompany us everywhere we go, infusing everything we do.

It may seem that anger has us in its clutches, hangs on to us relentlessly. But the truth is, we hang on to it. Why? Because it provides us with several payoffs.

First, anger covers up or substitutes for any feeling, such as fear, guilt, longing, frustration, or hopelessness, that has the potential for creating extreme discomfort.

Second, by using anger we can try to block out the reality or circumstances of the death. We may exhibit anger toward the deceased about something that had no relationship to the death, fastening on to some past action toward which we can direct our hostility. If we can maintain our anger, we can also hold on to our loved one, if only the part of him or her that we can criticize.

Third, anger permits us to experience a much-needed sense of control. Instead of feeling helpless, we feel as if we can exert some influence over our own lives or the lives of others. This is temporarily very satisfying because the death of a loved one (especially a sudden death) robs us of personal power. It plunges us, without mercy, into the darkest of pits. So if we can use anger as a ladder to climb out of that pit, we do it. Rung after rung, hand over hand, we gain control over our own vulnerabilities. When we are lashing out in anger, we feel justified; we are on firm ground. We are, in fact, self-righteous. This is the opposite of the queasy roller-coaster existence that we live as grief's victims in the aftermath of a death.

And, fourth, anger is--if only temporarily--a vital energy booster when we are at our lowest peak of despair and desolation.

But as much as anger fires us up, it also depletes our energy, suddenly draining us and leaving us vulnerable to more painful underlying feelings.

And, of course, anger can be debilitating over the long run. Anger that is turned on the self, for example, may be quite damaging. With women, self-inflicted anger tends to create depression; with men, it takes the form of self-destruction or self-abuse, such as alcoholism.

So even though some anger is normal, long-term or extreme manifestations are danger signs. We need to learn to manage our hostility to prevent such excesses.

Each of us can identify and deal with the feelings that are being masked by our anger. Make a conscious decision to explore emotions you have put aside or tried to bury. Ask yourself, "What would I feel if I could choose not to be angry?" Then devote some time to experiencing that feeling. For example, ask, "Why am I feeling so frustrated (or anxious or worthless)?" Give that

sentiment your attention and expression. Talk about it to a friend, to other survivors in a support group, or talk it over with a professional counselor.

If you're having particular difficulty managing your anger, you might want to keep an Anger Log, writing down what made you angry and identifying the hidden feelings behind the anger. Think about what you were trying to accomplish with your anger. Decide on an alternative approach to the same situation. This takes some dedication and concentration, but with practice it will be easier for you to identify positive modes of behavior.

If you find that you really do have justified anger toward someone, you may decide to explain your reasons to that person. If so, keep in mind that your goal is to achieve a mutual understanding, an acknowledged recognition and respect for your feelings. Instead of blaming, name your feeling, the action that caused it, and the reason for your feeling. For example, "I'm angry because I expected you to come to dad's funeral. When that expectation wasn't met, I felt that dad was not being given his due respect." Remember your goal is not to lash out, accuse, and escalate the hostility.

Above all, you need to ask yourself how long you will allow your anger to continue--because that is how long you are choosing to be a victim of your own emotion. Set your goal for decreasing anger, because it's only when you free yourself that you can begin to work toward the resolution of your loss. Contrary to what we may prefer to believe, feeling the pain of grief, feeling the loss and surrendering to sadness, is preferable to leading a life shaped by surges of adrenaline that only delay our mourning.

When a Child Dies

Surviving the death of dreams.

"It's not supposed to be this way," the mother of a dying teenager cried. "I wasn't meant to live longer than my daughter. But now I have to."

How do you survive the death of your child? As a parent, you're supposed to be the provider, the nurturer, the protector, the mentor, the guide. You invest love and hope and certain beliefs in your son or daughter. But most of all, you do not outlive your child.

When tragedy strikes and you do bury a child, you're faced with reconstructing a life that has been suddenly robbed of its parental responsibilities and joys. The source of a certain kind of reciprocal love in your life is now absent. Your child may have loved openly or buoyantly, or been reserved and quietly affectionate. He or she may have been a typical teenager--aloof, moody, even a bit defiant, loving reluctantly. Your adult child may have doubled in the role of your sister, brother, friend, or caregiver. In any case, the place you reserved in the center of your heart and soul for your unique son or daughter is now aching.

Parents who lose a child to miscarriage or infant death experience a different, wrenching loss--often made more painful by people's awkward efforts to suggest that the brevity of a child's life should limit the extent of grief. But parental bonds begin with the dreams and hopes we carry for our unborn children. You probably enjoyed months of anticipation. You may have set up a nursery, had showers, enjoyed the eagerness of potential grandparents. For you and all who shared your joy, the loss and grief are very real.

Regardless of the age of the child, when you lose a son or daughter, part of your self is gone. In the case of mothers, part of your physical self is gone--the body that grew and quickened within you. For both fathers and mothers, your sense of family has undergone severe change. There are hopes to abandon, expectations to dismiss, and a whole array of profound emotional responses that both confuse and weaken the strongest and most determined of adult survivors.

Often parents have severe feelings of anger directed at others they see as having some direct responsibility for their son or daughter's death. These may include members of the medical community, relatives, the child's friends, even organizations or institutions.

It's crucial to talk about your strongest emotions with someone you trust. Avoid friends and relatives who do not have the capacity to acknowledge your feelings of despair, sadness, longing, regret--or even guilt. You do not have any obligation to listen to someone tell you that you are lucky because you have other children, or that you can get pregnant again, or that there must be some way your child's accident was "part of God's plan," or that your child's illness could have been cured or averted. You have lost your child, and you need to talk to others who have done the same, those whose pain parallels yours, whose understanding will be deep and supportive.

You can find groups for grieving parents by contacting the pastoral care office of the largest hospital near you or by inquiring at the closest hospice. They should be able to direct you to local, specialized support, such as a group for women surviving neonatal death, or for parents surviving the loss of a child to AIDS. Consult the "resources" attached to this article for other national organizations that are likely to have local chapters in your area.

There will be times when you feel especially fragmented, as if the challenge of getting through the day is beyond your capabilities or beyond your desire. When you feel this way, let your heart dictate your direction. Rest and reflect and allow your feelings to come forth without censoring or resisting them. Don't hold back tears. It's not just a myth that crying makes you feel better--it actually does.

During these times of release and reflection, you might begin a project you can work on quietly, slowly, and lovingly--a scrapbook of photos, a letter or poem to your daughter, a piece of prose that describes your son--emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually. Describe everything he meant to others, everything he achieved in his life. You may tape-record your own memories or experiences. Some parents have pieced together clips from their videos and those of friends or relatives to make a composite of their child's life.

More than anything, follow your own lead, do what allows you some relief. If you need to tell your story over and over, seek out those who will listen. If you need to reflect upon your child's life, privately and for great lengths of time, then indulge yourself in solitude.

When you begin to regain some degree of peace and strength, consider contributing some part of yourself--your knowledge, affection, or skills--to a child or an adult in need, someone who could experience self worth as a result of your attention, guidance, and kindness.

Regardless of the brevity of your child's life, you can build a legacy out of the love you hold by allowing it to spill over into the lives of those you don't even know yet. As one mother put it, "You can gather the love you have and use it to lighten the darkened spirit of a neglected child who has never been the source of anyone's pride."

Whether or not you choose to put your grief into action in this way will be just one of the choices you consider as you work to reshape your future. Regardless of the direction you choose, you'll continue to tap those same powerful resources that helped you to this point. "Surviving his death

has brought me this far," a young father said, "now I owe it to my son to go forward with as much perseverance and vision as possible." Trust yourself to do the same, to follow the path that honors your heart.