

Grief and Forgiveness: 12 Tips for Self-Forgiveness

What is step one in coping with tough feelings? You guessed it: acknowledging them. Sitting with them. Feeling their horrible, intrusive, sometimes totally overwhelming presence. And guilt is a doozy. Not only that, but it is an incredibly normal and common grief emotion. Research proves it. And so do the comments of the zillions of grieverers we work with and talk with. After someone dies we feel guilty for so many reasons. For things we did, for things we didn't do, things we knew or didn't know, decisions we made or didn't make, things we said or didn't say.

We can get stuck in these vicious cycles where we rehash everything. Sometimes our guilt is warranted, sometimes not so much. Either way, we often have people telling us not to feel guilty, which of course isn't helpful at all. We can't just will our way out of feelings (but wouldn't it be nice if we could). But what do you DO about guilt? How do you move forward? Ultimately there is but one choice, and that is to find a way to forgive yourself. Easier said than done, right?

First, let's do a refresher on what forgiveness is, and what it isn't. There are many definitions of forgiveness, but the one we prefer is: *A willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior to one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her" (Enright et al in Enright and North 1998).* Some important points there – forgiveness does NOT mean excusing something or eliminating the mistake. It means you make decisions about what to let go of and what to hold on to.

Now the big question: how? The one thing that can be even harder than forgiving others is forgiving ourselves.

1. **Embrace guilt.** This feels like a weird way to start the process of self-forgiveness, but it isn't. It is important to know that guilt has value and self-forgiveness does not mean you will no longer feel remorse or guilt. You can forgive yourself, releasing the feelings of resentment and negative judgment, while still having a healthy level of guilt that stays with you.
2. **Figure out what you need to forgive yourself for.** This may seem obvious, but sometimes we have generalized feelings of guilt and we don't even know what for. If you are going to do the work of self-forgiveness it must be specific. This can be a very concrete process and you may want to write it down.
3. **Consider the difference between guilt and shame.** It is important to be aware of the feeling that you made a mistake or did something wrong and then the feeling that by extension you are a bad person. We all screw up. Sometimes those screw-ups are

small, sometimes they are huge, sometimes they are unimaginably devastating, but there is a distinct and important difference between doing a bad thing and being a bad person. It is important to consider if what you are feeling is guilt alone or has it bled into shame. Research has shown that those who feel guilt, rather than shame, are less likely to make the same mistakes.

4. **Remember your motives.** Sometimes we are quick to beat ourselves up about each and every thing we did or decision we made before a death using the benefit of hindsight. It is important to remember what you knew at the time, why you did what you did and what your intentions were.
5. **Sit with the discomfort.** Guilt is a painful and unpleasant emotion so, no surprise, our instinct can be to avoid it. The first step in working toward self-forgiveness is acknowledging exactly what we feel guilty for and facing it directly.
6. **Accept that guilt is not always rational.** You may try to reason your way out of guilt and fail. Others may try to reason with you that you should not feel guilty and also fail. It is important to remember that, though sometimes guilt is rational, sometimes it is not and we continue to feel guilt even when we know we didn't have control over a situation, we had good intentions, etc. This means that some pieces of forgiveness may be rational, others may not.
7. **Consider if you are holding yourself to a different standard.** Would you forgive a friend or family member in the same situation? Or would you tell them to forgive themselves? If so, consider why you are treating yourself differently than you would someone else. What would allow you to forgive that person and not yourself?
8. **Talk to your loved one.** Okay, of course, you can't literally do that. But you know your loved one amazingly well and can imagine what they would say. Write a letter to yourself as your loved one, or tell yourself what you think your loved one would tell you if they were here to discuss your guilt with you.
9. **Consider how you have grown.** Guilt and remorse often make us better people. It helps us become better people, avoiding the same mistakes again. Take the time to think about how you have learned and grown from your mistakes.
10. **Make amends.** This one can also be tricky because oftentimes the person you really want to forgive you or with whom you want to make amends is the person who died. So sometimes this means considering what else you can do that may symbolically make amends.
11. **Actively decide to forgive yourself.** When it comes to grief and forgiveness, at some point you have to be active. Sitting around waiting for guilt (or grief) to disappear without working at it is just not a good plan. Once you have taken the steps above,

make an active decision to let go of the self-judgment, criticism, and resentment you are carrying. It won't be easy, it might not come right away, but make an active choice to let go.

12. **Listen to a self-forgiveness meditation.** There are many out there and these meditations can often help connect us with forgiveness and reinforce our active decision to forgive. There are many online, but here is one example.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-7OzbeGud8>

Adapted from: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/grief-and-forgiveness-part-two-12-tips-for-self-forgiveness/>

