

Guilt and grief: coping with the shoulda, woulda, couldas

When my dad died I remember well the intense guilt I had in the months that followed. Though his death didn't fit into one of the categories known for guilt, that didn't stop me from feeling guilty. I felt guilt that I wasn't a match for a bone marrow transplant, though rationally I knew I had no control over that. I had guilt that I hadn't called him more during my first year of college, guilt that in the hospital we had told him it was okay to let go and that we would be okay without him. When my sister's boyfriend died of an overdose years later, my guilt went to a new level. I rehashed all the things I felt I should have done, all the negative thoughts I had over the years, and approximately a million other guilt-thoughts that often plague survivors of substance losses.

Now, we could just assume I have guilt issues (quite possible) but luckily I have worked with enough griever over the years to know that my guilt when grieving is the rule, not the exception. In our experience most griever have some level of guilt associated with their loss – sometimes big, sometimes small.

If you have ever felt guilt associated with your loss and articulated it to someone else there is a good chance you heard some variation of, “oh, don't feel guilty!” or “you shouldn't feel that way, it wasn't your fault”. If you're like me, your inner-angsty-14-year-old probably screamed “don't tell me how to feel, you don't know me!!”. In case you were worried, that is a totally normal reaction.

Here's the deal – guilt is a feeling. Feelings need to be validated and we need to find ways to accept, integrate, and move forward with these feeling. We can't stop feeling guilty because someone tells us to – sorry, that's sadly just not how feelings works. So, when it comes to why we feel guilt, it is important to reflect on the reasons for our guilt and then consider ways we can cope with guilt. But first and foremost, we need to accept that guilt is a common and normal feeling in grief.

Why Do We Experience Guilt and Grief?

Because we really did something wrong - As much as people are quick to say something wasn't our fault or we shouldn't feel guilty, a reality of life is that we all screw up sometimes. We make mistakes and sometimes those mistakes have significant consequences. Sometimes we fail to do things we wish we had done or should have done. That may be as large as a grievous error in judgment or mistake that led to a death. It could be as small as something hurtful we said, or something meaningful we failed to say.

Because we feel like we did something wrong - Just because you *feel* guilty doesn't mean you *are* guilty. There are many, many times that we griever are completely irrational. As we have been known to say, grief makes you crazy! We dissect every moment of time with our

loved one, we consider every 'shoulda, woulda, coulda' you can imagine. Our irrational brain will find just about anything to feel guilty about. Despite being irrational, this guilt can be consuming.

Because we want order - This is a big reason for why we experience guilt and blame, though as grievers we often fail to see this connection. The bottom line is this: without someone or something to blame, we have to accept that the universe may be unpredictable and chaotic. If we think we could have done something differently that would have changed the outcome of a loss, that can provide comfort that there is a rational order to things and that we have some control. If we accept that we never could have known or changed the outcome we must accept that some things that happen are complete outside our control. As long as we hold on to guilt we have hope that we could have controlled the outcome. A perception of control (however inaccurate) is often more comforting than considering that we have no control. Talk about the lesser of two evils . . .

As usual, the question becomes what do you DO about guilt? Here are some quick tips for coping with guilt:

1. **Acknowledge that guilt is a normal grief emotion** and don't let others minimize the validity of your grief experience.
2. **Consider what your guilt is all about.** Is it rational? Is it irrational? Is it about control?
3. **Talk it over with others.** Though you don't want people minimizing your feelings, talking about guilt can help you reflect on your grief. A good counselor or support group is a great environment to talk about feelings of guilt.
4. **Examine your thoughts.** Often our guilt thoughts, whether rational or irrational, start to consume us. They can drag us down into one of those bottomless black holes – the kind that are full of isolation, despair, and far too much wine and Ben & Jerry's ice cream. In order to adjust your thinking, you have to know what your guilt thoughts are and notice them when they arise.
5. **If your guilt feelings are irrational, admit it.** This doesn't mean dismissing your feelings of guilt. It means acknowledging that, though you feel guilty, you may not actually be guilty. Some common examples are acknowledging you did the best you could with the information you had at the time, you couldn't predict the future, there were many other factors at play other than your behaviors, etc. Being honest with yourself about your guilt is important, and accepting that grief is sometimes irrational can be helpful.
6. **Find positive thoughts to balance your guilt thoughts.** "Thought stopping" is a technique with mixed reviews among the mental health crowd. The idea is this – when you notice a negative thought taking over (ie. guilt) make a conscious effort to stop and replace the thought. Though it may not be quite this simple, there is value in having a

positive thought to balance negative guilt thoughts you experience. For example, if you are feeling guilt that you were not there at the moment of your loved one's death, when that thought comes up be prepared with a thought about the many times you were there.

7. **Forgive yourself.** Easier said than done, right? Remember, forgiveness does not mean condoning or excusing. Forgiveness can mean accepting that we may have done something we regret, but finding new attitude and perspective toward ourselves in relation to that action. It doesn't mean we forget, but means we find a way to move forward.
8. **Figure out what you have learned.** Guilt often teaches us something. It can be something about ourselves or about the world. We can learn and grow from almost any emotion (cheesy, but true) so take some time to consider what your guilt has taught you.
9. **Do something with your guilt.** Whether rational or irrational, you can use your guilt to help others. What you do may come out of things you have learned. Whether it is educating others so they can avoid the mistakes you feel guilty about, raising awareness about causes of death (anything from heart disease to substance abuse to suicide), or simply encouraging others to talk with their family about end of life wishes, you can use many guilt experiences to help others.
10. **Consider what your loved one would tell you.** Get yourself in a space to truly focus on thinking about your loved one. Imagine telling them how you are feeling – your regrets, your guilt, all of it. If there are things you wish you had said, say them. Then imagine what your loved one would tell you.

Adapted from: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/guilt-and-grief-2/>

