

BEREAVEMENT NEWSLETTER

Two natural and normal emotions experienced after the death of a loved one are **guilt** and **anger**. These feelings are often frightening and misunderstood by griever, even though they are very common. If these emotions are not dealt with properly, they can cause you to lose perspective on life. It is important to understand the powerful emotions of guilt and anger during the grief process.

GUILT

Most bereaved people feel some degree of guilt – guilt for what they did or didn't do when their loved one was alive:

“If only I had been there”.

“What if I had insisted she go to the doctor sooner”?

“I should have been more understanding”.

“I shouldn't have lost my temper”.

Unfortunately, in grief, most of our guilt comes from things we cannot change. All the “should'ves”, “what ifs”, and “if onlys” cannot be undone. However, none of us can live close to another person and love deeply without doing or saying things which we later regret. We are all imperfect human beings with imperfect relationships. When a loved one has died, we are reminded of those hurts and failings, real or imagined; of words we regret saying; incidents we'd like to forget; actions we'd like to take back.

These feelings of guilt are normal, though often not realistic. Some bereaved become tortured by their feelings of guilt, and it colors their whole life. Guilt is a strong emotion which is often magnified because the bereaved are in an extremely vulnerable state. The guilt is often experienced when the bereaved tries to answer the unanswerable, “Why did my loved one have to die?”

When someone has died of a prolonged illness, a loved one may have sat by the bed and wished or prayed for death to come. This is normal and doesn't mean a lack of love, but afterward, guilt can creep in.

It is natural to examine the past after a death has occurred. You become acutely aware of past mistakes and failures. Try to accept the fact that the past is past. It cannot be changed. You already have enough pain without punishing yourself more. A wise member of the clergy once said, "I believe that God forgives you. The question now is, 'Will you forgive yourself?'"

If you find yourself going over and over your regrets, get up, change your position or the room you are in. Physically move somewhere else for a little while to give your mind a change of pace.

If you truly have some regrets about what you may have said or done or failed to do, admit it, accept it, and let it go. Hanging onto guilt is unhealthy and keeps your wounds open, preventing you from growing and being who you really are.

Suggestions for Handling Guilt

If you feel guilty, it is helpful to admit it to yourself.

It is important to be truthful about why you feel guilty.

Keeping your guilt inside can limit your ability to cope and take care of yourself.

Talk about your guilt until you can let go.

Ask yourself what things specifically are bothering you most.

Talk over things with someone who will listen, care, and not judge.

Forgive yourself; ask for the forgiveness of your loved one and of God.

You are usually harder on yourself than on anyone else.

Forgive yourself and let go of your guilt.

If your faith is shaken, try to put your religious beliefs back together and find comfort in your religion.

Ask yourself if you want to live with guilt the rest of your life.

Realize that sometimes you are powerless and can't control everything that happens.

Remember that there is not always an answer to "why", and you don't need to blame.

Remember that you are human.

No one is perfect. Accept your imperfections.

Realize you did the best you could do under the circumstances.

Write about your feelings of guilt to the person who died.

You can say everything you wish you had said earlier.

Tell living people that you care about them.

If it is too hard to verbalize, send a card and write it inside.

Expect regrets:

Nothing evokes feelings of guilt like death.

Carol Luebering

"Preparing for a Parent's Death"

ANGER

Anger is a natural and normal part of grief. It is a legitimate protest about a loss:

“Why me?”

“What did I do to deserve this?”

“It just isn’t fair!”

The anger may be directed toward many different avenues:

- You may be angry at the disease which took your loved one’s life.
- You may be angry at the doctors or others in the medical field.
- You may be angry at family members who are grieving differently.
- You may be angry at friends who don’t seem to understand.
- You may be angry at God for allowing this death to happen.
- You may be angry at your loved one for dying.

Is it all right to be angry at God? Someone once said: “God has broad shoulders. He can take it”. Feel free to tell God about your anger. Tell God exactly how you feel.

To some people it may seem strange to be angry at the person who died. But this is not strange at all. A spouse may be left with children to raise, a house to keep up alone, problems with finances, etc. It is normal to react with anger at a loved one for leaving.

When someone you care about dies, there is nothing you can do to bring them back. This loss of control can come out as anger. Although some people think of anger as being bad, the emotion of anger is neither good or bad, right or wrong. What you do with your anger, however, can be bad. It should never be used to hurt yourself or someone else. Some healthy ways to deal with anger could include:

- Exercise: walk, run, shoot baskets, clean your house.
- Turn up your stereo and scream really loud.
- Hit your mattress with a rolled up towel or a tennis racket.
- Hit a garbage can or cardboard box with a baseball bat.
- Pound on a stack of pillows.
- Write a letter expressing your anger.
- Talk to someone who cares about you.
- Cry

When anger is not expressed, it builds up inside and becomes explosive, coming out at inappropriate times. Keeping it inside can also make you bitter. Putting into words how angry you are can lessen the anger episode. These words may need to be repeated each time the anger resurfaces. As your pain subsides, so will your anger.

By doing something with your anger, you are USING YOUR ANGER instead of LETTING YOUR ANGER USE YOU.

*It's a true turning point in your grief
When you are able to give up asking,
"Why?" and instead ask,
"Now that this has happened, what shall I do?"*

*Kathlyn S. Baldwin
"Taking the Time You Need to Grieve Your Loss"*

Other Resources You Might Find Helpful:

Grief - A Natural Reaction to Loss by Marge Heegard recognizes that we cannot lose anyone we love without feeling depressed. This book looks at the whole process, reducing fears, expressing anger, and resolving guilt.

A Guide to Understanding Guilt During Bereavement by Robert Baugher. This author looks at the should haves, why wasn't, self-punishment and different types of guilt. Guilt does not need to control your life or your grief.

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Hospice of Siouxland
224 Fourth Street
Sioux City, IA 51101
712-233-4144 / 1-800-383-4545

To contact a Bereavement Coordinator please call Hospice of Siouxland at the number listed above.

Written and Compiled by: Ruth E. Meisgeier, MSE and Pat Van Bramer, RN