



Guilt

When someone you love dies, grief often includes feelings of guilt. “I should have... I could have...I would have...Why didn’t I...? Why didn’t he...?”, are normal and common questions bereaved people ask themselves. Often these questions stick in the mind and play over and over. There is the guilt about things you wish you had done, things you wish you had not done, things you wish you had said, things you wish you had not said. There is “if only” guilt: if only I had noticed the symptoms, told him not to do that, done things differently, saw this coming, gotten here sooner, been here more often, watched her more closely, questioned the doctors more, not given that medication. There is survivor guilt, when you feel guilt that you are the one still alive. There is recovery guilt, when you “catch” yourself feeling happy or laughing, when you find you are moving on with your life and not thinking constantly about your loved one.

While guilt is normal and common, it can become incapacitating. If you let guilt take over your mind and your emotions, it can prevent you from coping in your day-to-day life. One way to try to sort out your guilt is to write down which of your guilt feelings are realistic and which are not realistic. Take a rational, cognitive approach to your grief. You may find this process results in an empty column of realistic guilt. Of course you couldn’t know what was coming. You let your loved one make the medical decisions for himself or herself. Of course, sometimes you were tired and perhaps not as patient as you could have been. Much of grief guilt tends to be unrealistic, emotional guilt. It can take time to let the cognitive analysis of your guilt sift down to your heart and emotions.

There are some techniques that can help you work through your guilt. Talk it through with a trusted person who can help you with the “realistic vs. unrealistic guilt exercise.” Focus on the positive parts of the relationship with your loved one, the happy memories, and all the things you did right in the relationship. Acknowledge that you did the best you could with the knowledge and the energy you had, as well as other obligations you had throughout the illness and at the time of death. Understand that 80% of communication is nonverbal, so your behavior and caregiving spoke volumes even if you did not utter the words you wish now you had. Use a thought-stopping technique if you get caught in a guilt spiral; tell yourself to JUST STOP and do something to get your mind off your guilt. Go outside, call a friend, listen to or play music, do something physically vigorous. Women tend to feel more guilt and dwell on it more than men. If you are a spiritual person, then talking with your faith leader might help. Think about how your loved one would view your guilt – would he or she tell you that there is no reason for you to feel guilty? Seek some individual counseling if you find that guilt is impacting your functioning and self-care. Join a grief support group where others understand because they are going through the same process of grief. Often it is harder to forgive ourselves than to forgive others. Be kind to yourself.