

RELEASING YOUR BURDEN OF GUILT & REGRET



GRIEF COURSE

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Week 4

"Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death." Elisabeth Kubler Ross

Guilt and Regret

The third need all grievors have is to release their burden of guilt and regret. Many people assume guilt is an uncommon experience because it's not included in the well-known Kubler-Ross 5 stages of grief model. While the Kubler-Ross grief model offers an informal framework to understand possible grief responses, it shouldn't be considered a strict guideline on *how* to grieve nor as a grief checklist.

Guilt

Guilt is a powerful emotion. It can hold us in bondage, isolate us and alter how we look at the world. Realistic guilt exists when we have done something we knew was wrong, but we may also unrealistically blame ourselves for things over which we had no control. Guilt causes us to punish ourselves and keeps us focused on the past.

Guilt may be a form of self-criticism for not meeting your own expectations and standards, and it may arise when you're grieving a significant loss.

Grief and guilt go hand-in-hand. But, holding yourself responsible for thoughts or perceived shortcomings can add the burden of guilt and regret to your grieving process.

Guilt is a feeling that may come from believing you didn't say enough, do enough, or make enough of an effort when you had the opportunity.

After your loss, you might start to blame yourself for an outcome that wasn't really within your control, for example, or you might find yourself avoiding places that remind you of what was lost.

In fact, each person's process is unique; there's no right or wrong way to work through a loss. It's natural to feel guilt or experience regret depending on your circumstances.

Guilt accompanies grief in nearly every loss, it certainly did in my case. Guilt, self-blame, and shame walk hand in hand with grief. The goal is to release the burden of guilt so we can get to the pure grief in order to fully grieve.

Guilt presents itself in different ways when we're in grief. It can often point to a primal wound that we have experienced in the past. Guilt keeps us from being able to be present to our guilt. It's a way for us to have the illusion of control and reinforces long-held beliefs we may have about ourselves.

We tend to judge ourselves harshly. In grief, we would never talk to others in the same harsh tones and with the same words we talk to ourselves.

Survivor Guilt

A common feeling among parents who have lost a child is survivor guilt, as it is seen that children are supposed to outlive their parents, not the other way around. Most parents feel as though they have failed as parents and question their power and abilities. The role of being a provider, protector, and mentor to that child diminishes after the death of the child, creating a confusion of identity, which may prove to be even stronger in parent's who only had that one child.

When parents lose a child, they also tend to lose social supports that were previously available to them. This loss of support often comes from the loss of interaction with other parents, as these parents may avoid interaction. This may be because they are unsure of what to say to the parents who have lost a child and not wanting to believe that this situation could ever happen to them. Losing a child is like losing a part of oneself, and the potential loss of social support makes it even more difficult for parents to grieve the loss of a child.

There are many feelings that may accompany the experience of grief, and few are more difficult to understand than the feelings of guilt and regret. Guilt and regret are painful feelings that often arise as a follow up to other feelings. A person might feel relieved that their loved one is no longer suffering, then guilt about the feeling of relief.

Someone might feel anger about circumstances related to the death, then guilt about the feeling of anger. Guilt is often the emotion that accompanies other grief-related feelings. This is one of the reasons it is so difficult to understand.

For example, many women blame themselves for miscarriage. The truth is most miscarriages are outside your control. Try not to add to your grief by blaming yourself.

Suicide is almost always accompanied by grief and regret. (Example or accidental drug overdose accompanied by fentanyl).

It is easy to confuse the experience of guilt with the experience of regret. Both are emotions that can occur when we are trying to make sense of this loss. They can arise from similar circumstances, and both can be very troubling.

After a death occurs, it is natural for people to want to comb back through the details leading to the death as a way of trying to understand how this could have happened. During this review of details, we may come across mistakes that were made, or things that we would change if we could.

Why You Might Experience Grief with Guilt

There are many reasons why you might feel grief and guilt at the same time. For example:

- cultural norms that imply children are responsible for older adults
- a sense of personal responsibility for doing or not doing something that you think could have changed the course of events
- regretting saying or not saying something when there was an opportunity
- experiencing relief from the loss
- having joyful moments in the presence of tragedy
- moving on after the loss

But experiencing guilt when grieving may have major mental health implications.

A 2019 study by The University of Groningen called, "Grief in Bereavement" included more than 1,300 bereaved participants and found that guilt was directly associated with a higher chance of experiencing complicated grief and depression. Complicated grief is formally known as prolonged grief disorder and is diagnosed when symptoms of grief persist for more than 12 months after the loss.

Signs of guilt during grief

How guilt during grief manifests in daily life can be as individual as your grieving process. Common behaviors may include:

- denying yourself basic care
- avoiding potentially joyful connections or comfort
- substance use
- putting yourself in situations that may put your safety in jeopardy

Guilt can also emerge from:

- social isolation
- avoiding topics, places, or people
- getting irritated with yourself
- engaging in negative self-talk
- self-sabotage

Regret

Regret is what we feel when we identify the “shoulda woulda couldas,” things that we would have done differently if we had known then what we know now. Examples of this might include wishing we had spent more time with a loved one before the death, wishing we had said “I love you” more often, or wondering if a different course of treatment could have possibly changed an outcome. We naturally wish we could do things differently.

The problem is we often get the two confused. You may be thinking “It doesn't matter what I call it, it is still painful.” While that is very true, knowing the difference between guilt and regret can help us to understand how to work with these painful emotions.

Forgiveness

It's important to explore our feelings of guilt in grief and then release them and forgive ourselves as well as others.

God forgives you and loves you. There are two kinds of guilt—*false* and *real*. If you have done wrong, repent and ask God to forgive you. Be wary of false guilt. We live with imperfect information and try to make good decisions. Sometimes things don't work out. Let the anger go as it only destroys you and serves no purpose.

No relationship is perfect. You have made mistakes. There are things you wanted to do with your loved one, or things you wish you didn't say. Thinking about all the things that could have been different can overwhelm you. Accept God's forgiveness, forgive others, and free yourself from guilt. Apologize from your heart in prayer and let all negative thoughts go.

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”

– Acts 3:19

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

– Luke 6:37

“When you forgive, you in no way change the past – but you sure do change the future.”

– Bernard Meltzer

HOW DOES THE FATHER FORGIVES US? (The Story of the Prodigal Son):

1. THE FATHER SEARCHES FOR US TO RETURN.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

Luke 15:20

1. THE FATHER MOVES BEFORE WE DO.

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” **Romans 5:6**

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’” **Romans 5:8**

"For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" **Romans 5:10**

1. THE FATHER RUNS TOWARD US.

"... He (the Father) ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (v.20)

3 LESSONS TO LEARN TO BECOME LIKE THE FATHER:

1. LEARN TO GRIEVE. (vv.14-15)

"My tears have been my food day and night." (David) **Psalm 42:3**

"Jesus wept." **John 11:35**

1. LEARN TO FORGIVE.

3 Stages on the Journey of Forgiveness:

1. Own my pain.
2. Surrender my right to get even.
3. Wish the offender well.
4. LEARN TO REJOICE.

But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." **(v. 32)**

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son."

Matthew 22:2

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" **Philippines 4:4**

This was a thick topic to work through, but I find it so important to cover. We, as pastors and counselors, need to remember to have compassion when guilt takes hold of our client's grief.

Live One Day at a Time

Prayer: Give me the strength to get through today. And when my head hit the pillow, I would thank him for giving me the strength.

THE END

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