Grief and the Burden of Guilt

Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death. ~ Coco Chanel

Guilt is a normal response to the perception that we’ve somehow failed in our duties and obligations or that we’ve done something wrong. It generates a jumbled mixture of feelings including doubt, shame, inadequacy, insecurity, failure, unworthiness, self-judgment and blame, anxiety and fear of punishment.

When your loved one’s terminal illness was finally diagnosed, as a caregiver you may feel guilty that you hadn’t noticed symptoms sooner, waited too long to seek treatment or didn’t do enough to comfort your beloved. If death came suddenly or unexpectedly, you may feel guilty for not being present when it happened. If it came after a long, lingering illness, you may feel guilty for feeling relieved that your loved one’s suffering is over and you’re now free from the burden of worry and care. You may feel guilty that you are the one who survived, or uncomfortable that you received an insurance settlement or inheritance following the death of your loved one. If you’re a religious person, you may feel guilty that you feel so angry at God.

Unfortunately, guilt is a natural and common component of grief. When someone you love dies, it’s only human to search for an explanation, to look at what you did or did not do, to dwell on the what if’s and if only’s. You agonize and tell yourself, “If only I’d done something differently, this never would’ve happened.” Sometimes, though, there simply isn’t anything you could have done differently. When your loved one’s illness or death occurred, chances are that whatever happened beforehand was not intentional on your part. In the wise words of internationally known author and publisher Louise Hay, we do the best we can with our understanding at the time, and when we know better, we do better. Given the stress you were under at the time and how exhausted you may have been, you were doing the best you could. You were basing whatever you did on what you knew, given the information available to you then.

Harsh as it may seem, consider that even if you had done things differently, your loved one still could have died in some other way at some other time! Sometimes we act as if we can control the random hazards of existence, even when we know that death is a fact of life.

Guilt is driven by our own personal beliefs and expectations, and dealing with it requires that we examine what we think we did wrong, face it and evaluate it as objectively as possible. For example, what did you expect of yourself that you did not live up to? Were your expectations unrealistic? If they were, then you need to let go of them. Since you did all that you were capable of doing at the time, there simply is no basis for your guilt, and you need to let go of that as well.

Nevertheless, if after careful examination of the facts, you find that your expectations of yourself are legitimate and you still did not live up to them, it’s important to face and take responsibility for what you believe you could have done differently. Healthy guilt allows us to own up to and learn from our mistakes. It gives us a chance to make amends, to do things differently next time, to come to a better understanding of ourselves, to forgive ourselves and move on.
Tips for Coping with Guilt:

- Identify what it is that you feel guilty about. Resist the urge to keep such thoughts and feelings to yourself like so many deep, dark secrets. Bring them out into the open where they can be examined. Share them with a trusted friend or counselor, who can view your thoughts and feelings more objectively, and challenge what may be irrational or illogical.

- Listen to the messages you give yourself (the should haves, could haves and if only’s), and realize the past is something you can do absolutely nothing about.

- When guilty thoughts come to mind, disrupt them by telling yourself to stop thinking such thoughts. Say “STOP!” firmly and out loud if you need to.

- Live the next day or next week of your life as if you were guilt-free, knowing you can return to your guilt feelings any time you wish. Pick a start time, and stop yourself whenever you make any guilt-related statements.

- Write down your guilt-related statements, set a date, and pledge that from that day forward, you won’t say them to yourself anymore. Post them and read them every day.

- If you are troubled by feeling relieved that your loved one’s suffering has ended, know that a heavy burden has been lifted from your shoulders; you have been released from an emotionally exhausting and physically draining experience, and to feel relieved is certainly understandable.

- If you believe in God or a higher power, consider what He or She has to say about forgiveness.

- Participate in a support group — it’s a powerful way to obtain forgiveness and absolution from others.

- Be your own best friend. What would you have said to your best friend if this had happened to that person? Can you say the same to yourself?

- Remember the good things you did in your relationship with your loved one and all the loving care you gave. Focus on the positive aspects: what you learned from each other, what you did together that brought you joy, laughter and excitement. Write those things down, hold onto them and read them whenever you need to.

- Ask what you expected of yourself that you didn’t live up to. How is it that you didn’t? What were the circumstances at the time? What have you learned from this that you’ll do differently next time?

- What can you do to make amends? Find a way to genuinely apologize to your loved one’s spirit and ask for forgiveness.

- Have a visit with your loved one. Say aloud or in your mind whatever you didn’t get to say while your loved one was still living. Be as honest as you can.

- Have your loved one write a letter to you. What would this person say to you about the guilt and sadness you’ve been carrying around?

- Ask what it would take for you to forgive yourself. Can you begin doing it? Say out loud to yourself, “I forgive you.” Say it several times a day.
• Remember that no one else can absolve your feelings of guilt—only you can do so, through the process of intentionally forgiving yourself.

• When you’ve consciously learned all you can learn from this situation, and when you’ve made any amends you consider necessary, then it’s time to let go of your guilt, to forgive yourself, and to move on.

• Channel the energy of your guilt into a worthwhile project. Do good deeds in your loved one’s honor.