

Guilt: A Normal but Unnecessary Burden

Guilt can be a common yet complex emotion in grief. The truth is that we can feel guilty about so many things. Guilt does not always have to be rational to be real. That means even when we realize our guilt is not based on reality, we still may experience it.

Two researchers, Margaret Miles and Alice Demi, identified six different types of guilt:

First was **causation guilt**. Here individuals feel guilty that they are responsible, because of something they did or failed to do, for the death of a person. Gail always pressed her husband to go the doctor. Yet he always put it off, claiming more pressing tasks. He died of a massive heart attack, one that Gail thought could have been avoided had he taken better care of his health and regularly visited a physician. Gail felt responsible feeling she never pushed him hard enough.

A second form of guilt is **moral guilt**. Here the person grieving believes that the loss is some sort of a punishment for a prior act.

Role guilt is the feeling that you were not a good enough brother, father, mother, sister, spouse—whatever the role was in the person's life. Such guilt often can arise within the tense and difficult days as one struggles with the disease or the demands of caregiving. In other cases guilt may result from earlier aspects of the relationship. John, for example, felt guilty over the years he had not spoken to his brother following an argument over inheritances after the sale of their parents' home. Even though they eventually reconciled before his brother's death, John regretted all those missed years.

Then there is **survivor guilt**, experienced as a wish that the person grieving had died instead of the person who actually did.

Grief guilt is where one feels guilty that he or she is not grieving well, perhaps because of poor coping.

In **recovery guilt**, griever's sense that they are coping too well. Grief is a roller coaster experience of ups and downs. It is not unusual to experience all types of guilt in the normal cycle of good and bad days. And while grief is a normal reaction to loss, it is one we have to explore, as research has indicated that unresolved or high levels of guilt can complicate our grief.

First, we need to name our guilt, to recognize and understand it as one of the many common reactions that are an inevitable part of the experience of grief. Second, we need to fully examine it. How real is it? So many times we may have unrealistic expectations of what we can control or accomplish. We may ask ourselves if others would find us guilty. Such a question can offer perspective.

Other times, we may need to do something tangible—write a letter, speak to an empty chair, or say something at the graveside. Finally, we may need to explore our beliefs. Every faith or philosophy understands the need for forgiveness, including forgiving ourselves.

Guilt is a heavy burden in grief. We do not need to carry guilt forever on the journey with loss.

By **Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv**, is Senior Consultant to HFA and a Professor of Gerontology at The College of New Rochelle. *Journeys with Grief: A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement*, copyright Hospice Foundation of America, 2018.