

## GUILT OR REGRET?

Guilt and regret are two of the most common emotions we experience on life's journey. The following concepts help us understand their differences and navigate our best response to them.

Guilt applies when we mistakenly have done something wrong or immoral. It is an emotional indicator that tells us, "There is a problem here." It is both instructive and self-corrective.

Seldom does guilt apply for an intentionally wrong or deliberately immoral act. When we wish things could have happened differently, it is most often regret we experience.

We need to ask ourselves if our guilt is realistic. Is it deserved, or even appropriate? Is it *Positive Guilt* from which we learn from having been hurtful to ourselves or others, leading to a change of attitude and practice? Or is it *Undeserved Guilt*? "If only I..." or "I should have..."

*Question: Without changing the outcome (since no one controls when someone else dies), what would you have done differently around the time of the person's death?*

Allow yourself to ask someone you trust for objective feedback.

With car crashes, a sense of guilt is common, especially for parents in protector roles.

## WHY GUILT?

1. Self-blame is a way to restore a sense of control and fight the randomness and senselessness. Often it is easier to find yourself guilty than to face helplessness.
2. There may be a need to explain the death through blame.
3. For the family of origin, it can be, "Everything is my/our fault!"
4. Western culture is litigious and assigns guilt judicially and emotionally.

Regret is part of all relationships, especially after a sudden or violent death. In these circumstances, there is no opportunity to be part of the death story. Through a lingering illness, we can be bedside to provide care and comfort to our loved one.

With sudden death, there is no opportunity for "fence-mending," healing damaged relationships, or taking care of unfinished business.

## COPING WITH GUILT AND REGRET

1. Distinguish one from the other and process with someone you trust;
2. Practice compassion towards yourself and work intentionally to forgive yourself;
3. Write about it and give yourself time to process it;
4. Acknowledge truths about the relationship that may have been less than ideal, which involved choices by all parties, not just your own.

## FORGIVENESS

Humans are not perfect; we all make mistakes. How can we make things right and move forward? Humans are such social beings. Many of our various relationships are so important that if something goes wrong (e.g., a misunderstanding, a mistake, a breach), we will seek a way to repair or restore the relationship.

As we move along the path toward wholeness in our recovery and leaning into our best selves, we encounter the need to forgive others and ourselves. We are humans, and we have limits. Thankfully, there is a way to make things right again, to restore our relationships with one another when appropriate. Bringing ourselves into integrity...that way or path is forgiveness. Wikipedia defines forgiveness as *the process of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offence, difference or mistake, and/or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution.*

Factors to consider when thinking about forgiving others or ourselves:

- ***Forgiveness is more of a process than an end goal. It is rarely an act or event.*** If forgiveness were an end goal and we still feel hurt, anger, or guilt, resolution would seem impossible. Therefore, we need to understand forgiveness as a process, something we work on day by day, an intention that becomes our aim.
- ***Forgiveness can begin when we are ready and not one minute before.*** If we are still having strong emotions like anger or fear, it is not yet time. After we move through the grief, the anger, the resentment, the fear—whatever the emotions, then it is time. Many ways include self-care to process strong emotions, and if you get stuck, therapy.
- ***Forgiveness is something we do for ourselves; not forgiving (or nurturing a resentment) hurts us.*** Knowing and feeling our emotions are essential to a healthy and whole life. We can't selectively numb feelings; numbing the pain also numbs the joy. Learning to move through the pain (instead of around it) will be an important part of this process. *They did the best they could with what they had.* Forgiveness is neither explaining away or minimizing nor letting people off the hook for their wrongdoing.
- ***Forgiving ourselves can be one of the most difficult, yet most important parts of our recovery.*** If we cannot be compassionate to ourselves, it is very difficult to offer compassion to others.
- ***Forgiveness does not mean we forget or allow someone to keep hurting us. It is NOT excusing or condoning.*** It is possible to both forgive and remember everything that happened to us *and* to set a boundary in place to protect ourselves from further harm. Sometimes that means we cannot be around that person who does not listen or change their behavior and who would continue to hurt us. (See *The Mourner's Bill of Rights* and *The Suicide Survivor's Bill of Rights* by Dr. Alan Wolfelt.)
- ***Offering forgiveness should sometimes NOT be done in person.*** If the offender is a narcissist who would not acknowledge wrongdoing or could abuse you that person

should not be approached. If the offender is deceased, in-person forgiveness is impossible. The offender need not be present. For some who don't deserve the offer of your forgiveness, they need not know. Your forgiveness is for *your* benefit, not theirs.

- ***Forgiveness is evidence of strength, not weakness.*** Forgiveness work takes courage and willingness to engage in difficult self-reflection and process painful emotions.
- ***Forgiveness is a central value in many faiths and cultural traditions.***
- ***Forgiveness is easier when you practice on the small hurts and slights, working your way toward the more challenging offenses.*** It is important to create a forgiving attitude or intention. We must build up our forgiveness "muscles" by practicing on easier situations to gain strength and resilience.
- ***An important part of forgiveness is letting it go.*** You get to decide the timing and exactly what you are letting go. One thing you let go might be caring about other people telling you to let something go. It helps to consciously stop beating yourself up about it. When it surfaces in your mind, you can choose deep compassion for yourself. You deserve it.
- ***For suicide survivors, sometimes forgiveness means eventually acknowledging there was nothing more we could have done.*** Scholarly studies show that whatever you might have done differently, the result ends the same. Acknowledge there might have been many things you did to keep that person alive. Forgive yourself for not saving them. You could not save them from their action but practicing forgiveness can help save yourself and others.

Adapted from Swedish Hospital Traumatic Loss / Bereavement Care