

Understanding the Guilt of Grief

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If you're feeling guilty, ashamed, or regretful in the aftermath of the death of someone loved, the first thing I want to do is assure you that all your emotions are normal. While these feelings are painful, they are common and natural. There is nothing wrong with you. These guilty feelings can mean that you have a developed sense of right and wrong, you care about others and your relationships with them, and you strive to be a better person.

Second, I promise you can find relief from these hurtful feelings. When you become better acquainted with your guilt, shame, or regret and work on understanding and restoratively expressing it, over time, it will soften. It may seem counterintuitive to you right now, but the truth is that, like all feelings in grief, your guilt is trying to teach you something. And if you allow it to speak, it will no longer weigh so heavily on your heart and cause you so much pain.

Guilt, Shame, and Regret

Guilt, shame, and regret are close cousins. They belong to a group of feelings psychologists call "self-conscious emotions," meaning they are feelings of self-awareness — they're emotions we have about ourselves. What do guilt, shame, and regret have in common?

Judgment

It's important to note that self-conscious emotions are self-evaluative. In other words, they arise when we judge ourselves. What are we judging? We're measuring ourselves against the yardstick of our social and cultural rules and values. Human beings have many rules, expectations, and values — spoken and unspoken. Think of self-conscious emotions as moral emotions.

Backward-looking

What's more, guilt, shame, and regret are backward-looking emotions. You feel them in the now, but they're caused by memories of things done (or not done) in the past.

In grief, it's instinctive and necessary to go backward before we can go forward. When someone we love dies, we naturally turn around, remembering the time we shared with them.

So, the backward-looking nature of guilt, shame, and regret in

grief is normal and necessary. Whether your grief journey includes guilt or not, it's good to excavate the past, look at old photos and videos, share stories, and talk about what happened. In fact, remembering the past is what makes hoping for the future possible. The key is not to get stuck in the past, which is why befriending and integrating guilty feelings is so important. You won't be able to move forward unless you do so.

Secrecy

Have you felt yourself concealing the guilt of your grief? Have you noticed that you would prefer to keep it a secret? Guilt, shame, and regret tend to hide in deep, dark corners. They typically don't like to be revealed.

In grief psychology, we sometimes talk about disenfranchisement. Certain types of loss tend to be stigmatized, and the people grieving those deaths or losses often experience disenfranchised grief, meaning their grief is often not broadly acknowledged or well-supported by their community. Sometimes it's even shamed. Examples include grief following suicides, overdoses, and, sometimes, military deaths.

We tend to stigmatize guilt, shame, and regret in similar ways. They're often based on secrets, and we keep them a secret because we feel ashamed, and then they become even more secret because we haven't brought them into the light in a timely fashion — at the time of the loss



“Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion of death.”

— Coco Chanel

— so we feel even more ashamed, and the downward spiral continues.

Secrecy is not your friend if you hope to heal in grief. All your feelings need to be acknowledged, encountered, and shared outside of yourself if they are to soften. They need the light of affirmation and the balm of normalization.

The Utility of Guilt

The fact that guilt exists is all the reason we need to accept it as a normal part of human life. All emotions are natural, and this includes the self-conscious emotions of guilt, shame, and regret.

But, feelings of morality also serve a purpose in our lives. They encourage us to act responsibly. In fact, they help us understand what responsible behavior is. They direct us to consider others. They remind us that we are part of a community that needs rules and mutual consideration to function. They're the guardrails that help keep society safe, vulnerable individuals protected, and

families safeguarded. They nurture one of the most meaningful emotions available to humankind: empathy.

Can you imagine a world with no morality? It's not a pretty picture, is it? But, as with everything in life, moderation is key. Not enough guilt and you have anarchy. Too much guilt and you have repression and misery.

The Dangers of Guilt

Prolonged, pronounced guilt, shame, and regret are harmful to your well-being. They're emotions to experience and work through — not inhabit forever.

Physical

What does guilt feel like in your body? Stop reading for a moment and see if you can locate the sensation and describe it to yourself. Where do you notice it? What are the qualities of the feeling?

Guilt often feels similar to fear or worry. This is because guilt releases the same stress hormone, cortisol, that anxiety does. Over time, too much cortisol in the body can lead to high blood pressure, a higher risk of heart disease and diabetes, and clinical depression and anxiety disorders. What's more, research demonstrates that high guilt levels dampen the immune system. This makes people more vulnerable to illness and disease.

Guilt may also feel heavy, like a weight on your chest or an anchor dragging you down. Studies have shown that the psychic burden of guilt makes physical tasks seem more difficult. Like depression, guilt can sap us of energy and drain our productivity.

Emotional

Guilt feels bad emotionally — it hurts. Anything that hurts is a symptom that needs attention.

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Social

Feelings of guilt, shame, and regret may be negatively affecting your relationships. These emotions can lower your self-esteem, making you feel unsure of yourself and less worthy of love and care. You might avoid spending time with people. The secrecy of guilt may also make you feel unable to open up when you're around others for fear of disclosing something you're embarrassed about or feel ashamed of.

Think of guilt as a wall you're building around your heart, knowingly or unknowingly. It's likely blocking affection and companionship. It's getting in the way of close relationships. It's time to dismantle the wall, brick by brick.

Spiritual

Guilt shuts you down and can make you feel isolated, anxious, and burdened. Good spiritual health feels the opposite — light, curious, open, loving, and free. However, life's spiritual journey also includes encountering and wrestling with spiritual challenges as they arise, and the guilt of grief is one such challenge. So don't be

afraid to draw upon, question, or confront your spiritual beliefs as you work to understand and restoratively express your guilt. Just remember, in the long term, ongoing, unrelenting guilt will get in the way of spiritual experiences like awe, gratitude, and joy.

Befriending and Restoratively Expressing Your Guilt, Shame, and Regret

Your feelings of guilt, shame, and regret are not your enemies. Yes, they are causing you pain, but they are there for a reason. They are there to teach you about your past, your ingrained thoughts and behaviors, and your choices moving forward.

To befriend your feelings is to be present to them. It is to turn toward them instead of away from them. It is to bear witness to them and honor them. Consider that your grief — including your guilt — is your love in a different form. Regard it with compassion and tenderness, just as you do your love.

Expressing your guilt is also essential. Why? First, all grief feelings must be expressed, or mourned, to be worked through and healed — no exceptions. Second, guilt requires social review and affirmation because, as we've said, it is based on self-judgment about social rules. The only way to fully bear witness to your guilt is to have it heard and considered by members of your community. If you never share your guilt outside of yourself, you will always carry that feeling of secrecy and, likely, shame.

No matter what you are feeling, it's necessary to talk about it. Guilt is a very normal, understandable human experience. Rest assured that most of the time, feelings of guilt are associated with behaviors or decisions that those who care about you will readily empathize with. We have all made mistakes. We all experience guilt and regret. We understand.



About the Author

Longtime TAPS supporter Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is a member of the TAPS Advisory Board. He has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll) and *The Guilt of Grief: How to Understand, Embrace, and Restoratively Express Guilt, Shame, and Regret after a Loss*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.

