

Haven Herald



Grief and Guilt by Sarah Raison

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. We are used to hearing these emotions listed (some say they are “stages”) when talking about grief but there are so many others besides. There’s anxiety, there’s shock, there’s sorrow...and there is guilt. Some of the most common things people feel guilty about after a loss in their lives are:

Guilt that the relationship wasn’t better

While someone is alive, there is always the possibility that a not-great relationship could become better. Once someone dies, there are no more chances or possibilities. Some people feel guilt after a loved one is gone because they didn’t have a better relationship with them. They might feel they should have tried harder, done more, been more accepting, or been kinder. It can be difficult to deal with the finality of a relationship that wasn’t always good.

Guilt that you couldn’t save them

No matter the circumstances of a death, people often feel a sense of guilt that they possibly could have done something to prevent the person from dying in the manner that they did. If only they had seen a different doctor, had a particular symptom checked, not gotten in the car, or been more careful. We feel a sense of guilt that *we* should have been magically wiser—we should have known exactly what a symptom was indicative of, known the best doctor for them to see, gotten them to the hospital in time, addressed their depression more effectively, or kept them out of danger. After all, what happened was the worst possible outcome, so it is natural to feel that *any* decisions other than the ones that were made would have been preferable. The rumination and regret that accompany these thoughts can often be relentless.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Winter is here and that brings shorter days and colder temperatures, more time indoors, and, perhaps, more time to reflect on our lives and our losses. There are fewer distractions in winter. At Haven we prepare for our winter programs and plan for the year ahead. We also take time to work on projects we have put off. It is, in many ways, a quieter time.

The topic of this newsletter is guilt. There is guilt and regret with loss and it takes time to work through it. In reflection, it is important to recognize your feelings, and, if necessary, find support in dealing with these feelings. There are things that can help such as writing a letter to your loved one, joining a support group, or talking to a grief counselor, but, ultimately, your guilt is part of your story and your grief. Find ways to help you cope, but time and acceptance may be your greatest teachers.

Jill Bellacicco



Guilt over what was done or not done

In cases where we did have an overall good relationship with the deceased, there can still be guilt over things that we did (or did not) do. These emotions often rise to the surface in the days just after the death and we think things like: *I should not have yelled at them, I should have helped out more, listened more, come to visit at times I meant to, but didn't. I should have been there when they died. I should have been a better child, parent, spouse, or friend.*

Survivors guilt

Survivors guilt is simply put—feeling guilty for being alive when others are not. It is most common in those who have survived a particular event where others have lost their lives (for example, a car accident where you lived but others died). But it can also be present in anyone who is still living when their loved one is dead. The thoughts of “why them?” and/or “why not me?” can be very pervasive in this type of guilt.

Guilt over how you're grieving

For some people, the guilt they feel is not over the loss, but instead with how they are coping in the wake of the loss. When a death leaves you extremely depressed and not coping well, grievors sometimes feel guilt and frustration with their own emotions. *Why am I still struggling? Why is this so hard? Why am I so incapacitated? Why is this taking so long?* Many people struggle with guilt over not being the same person they were prior to the loss due to their grief and the impact it has on their life.

Guilt over feeling relief from a loss

Sometimes, possibly because the relationship was not good, or because the dying person was suffering tremendously, we feel relief after a death. And those feelings of relief can bring guilt, because feelings of relief after a death are sometimes not socially acceptable.

Guilt over being happy again or “moving on”

Guilt can also come at times when we start to feel better. Sometimes we might feel guilty for feeling happiness and enjoying life when our loved one no longer can. We can also feel guilty when life feels mostly good again, or when we have moved forward in our grief and it no longer consumes so much of our thoughts. People who have lost a partner might feel guilty when first enjoying a new relationship.

Blessing

by Carrie Newcomer

May you wake with a sense of play,
 An exultation of the possible.
 May you rest without guilt,
 Satisfied at the end of a day well done.
 May all the rough edges be smoothed,
 If to smooth is to heal,
 And the edges be left rough,
 When the unpolished is more true
 And infinitely more interesting.
 And the things you've left behind,
 Rest quietly in the unchangeable past.
 May you embrace this day,
 Not just as any old day,
 But as this day.
 Your day.
 Held in trust By you,
 In a singular place,
 Called now.



Why do we experience guilt?

Because we really did something wrong

As much as people are quick to say something wasn't our fault or we shouldn't feel guilty, the reality is that sometimes mistakes are made. Sometimes we fail to do things we wish we had done or should have done, large or small. *Sometimes*, this is the case.

Because we *feel* like we did something wrong

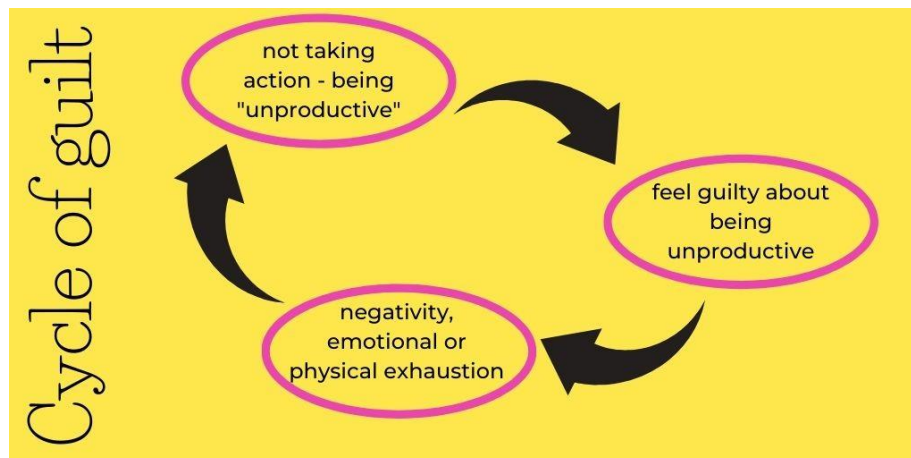
However, far more commonly, a grieving person only *feels* guilty, which doesn't mean they are actually guilty. Grief can make us very irrational, and dissecting every moment of time with our loved one or the circumstances of their death leads to many loops of "should haves" and "what ifs" which are not fair or logical. Our irrational brain can find just about anything to feel guilty about.

Because we want a sense of control or order

This is a reason why we experience guilt. We think that we could have done something differently that would have changed the outcome. This means that we must also accept that things happen outside of our control.

What to do about feelings of guilt:

- Talk about it. Talking with a trusted person about these deep thoughts can help alleviate guilt or shame. Keeping something to ourselves can amplify guilt.
- Identify what you are feeling guilty about and then do a reality check. Determine if these thoughts are irrational or illogical.
- Remind yourself that you are human and acknowledge what you cannot control. How much are you saying "I should have" which is often not fair nor productive.
- Forgive yourself or your loved ones for decisions you wish had been different.
- Think about what your loved one would say to you. How would they help you to be free from the guilty feelings?



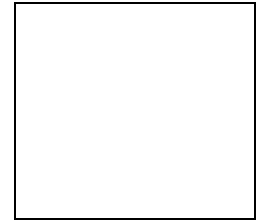
HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003



Winter Schedule

In person
Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group
2nd Saturday of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Four-week Widow/Widower/Partner Support Group
Now forming for early spring 2024

Call or email Haven to register for the group.

Zoom Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours