

GRIEF and GUILT

It seems sad, and terribly unfair too, that grief should so often be coupled with guilt. After all, it is difficult enough to bear the anguish of loss, but further injury is added when guilt comes sneaking in the “back door” (as it often does), and latches on to one’s sorrow for the duration. When guilt is added to our grief, it seems akin to adding salt to a wound.

Yet, guilt is a complicated emotion that is often part and parcel of the grief process. Guilt can be real or imagined. Everyone in mourning does not necessarily experience guilt, but many of us inevitably do. Sometimes our friends and family and ministers and neighbors unwittingly add to our guilt. But more often we pour the salt ourselves. We fabricate transgressions where none existed. Normal relationship squabbles that took place before the death become exaggerated into capital offenses. Legitimate misdeeds, words or actions that we truly regret, become steeped in shame. We are often slow to forgive ourselves. We sometimes blame others to assuage our guilt. Why, for so many of us, does guilt take such a prominent role in our struggle to heal from a loss?

For some, guilt is the natural expression of unfinished business.

We may feel remorse for words left unspoken, words of love, apology, appreciation, forgiveness, for rifts that were not mended. These are the “regrets” that often translate into guilt.

“I wish I had visited her more often over the years.”

For some, guilt is the inevitable mixed response to what was a *mixed relationship*.

When the relationship in life had been a tangle of love and animosity (as many of our relationships are), the guilt also is tangled mixture of sorrow, relief, and guilt.

“My dad and I never really got along, but now that he’s gone, I feel strangely empty.”

Some guilt is based on the misperception that we somehow had the *power to prevent the death*.

We feel guilt over not having been unable to control an uncontrollable event. We may know this guilt is irrational in our heads, but it feels very real in our hearts.

“If only I had nagged him into quitting smoking...”, “If only I had driven that night...”

Guilt shows up in a myriad of other ways too; guilt for being angry at God; guilt for feeling relief, guilt over a suicide; guilt over suffering; guilt for being alive.

What helps? Like the journey through grief, there are no simple answers. Sometimes guilt dissipates as the loss is worked through. Some find it helpful to clarify the specifics of their guilt by making lists. Lists made one month after the loss can look very different six months later. Some people use rituals to release guilt, or restitution of some kind, forgiveness and support. Eventually, each of us must wade through our own truth, accepting and discarding and coming to terms with the role guilt played in our mourning.