

April 11, 2021

### ***Pleading Guilty***

Dear Friends,

The subject of guilt comes up quite often in our support groups, and even though ‘guilt’ didn’t make it to the final list of the “*Stages of Grief*,” the famous book by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, it might as well have in my opinion. Like all the ‘stages,’ listed (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), some people may never experience guilt and others may move through it rather quickly. But some of us may get stuck in the muck for a while. It’s common, it’s natural, and it’s quite normal to wrestle with guilt while we grieve. It is something, however, we hopefully will not carry with us for the rest of our lives. Guilt, when addressed and dealt with carefully, can be diminished and eventually expunged from our minds. This, of course, takes time and some effort, but the reward of letting it go is priceless. Lately the experience of guilt has been surfacing much more in our group discussions, particularly with those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic, and so I wanted to address it a bit today.

After someone close to us dies, we think back to events, conversations, and even behaviors we engaged in before they passed. Often, we can start to examine the way we believe we played a vital role in our person’s final decline, accident, or illness. There are times when some of us can even assume responsibility for the death, which can range from thinking we were unkind or unhelpful to thinking we actually caused it in some way. We can certainly come up with a lot of reasons to feel miserable about ourselves. The fact is, however, that very few of us have any legitimate reason for feeling such guilt, nevertheless, it is the way we can feel.

Grief guilt quite often stems from the illusion that we truly believe that maybe, just maybe we had some control over what happened, and we could have somehow changed the outcome. We all want a re-wind on this, and quite often guilt is our way of re-winding the tape and taking the blame. In doing this we subconsciously bring order to chaos and get some sense of control over our experience of powerlessness. We can create our own cause and effect in our own brains: “If I had only called the doctor or the ambulance sooner...” “If I had not gone to

work that day...” “If I had noticed she wasn’t feeling well...” “If I had said ‘I love you’ more often...” “I should have....” “I would have....” “I could have....” I’m sure most of us can fill in the blanks readily and immediately. The ‘woulda, shoulda, coulda’s are torturous and debilitating.

“Normal guilt comes from wishing we had done something differently. But normal guilt can turn into self-loathing when we believe we are someone terrible,” says David B. Feldman, PhD. “When someone believes their loved one’s death is all their fault, they may begin to feel worthless and awful about themselves.” This self-loathing results from being way too hard on ourselves and this is something which we really need to talk through and work through with someone who has a clearer perspective than we do.

We need to recognize that no relationship is all bad or all good. It’s not fair to ourselves to look back and expect perfection or super-human omniscience and capability. When we pile these unrealistic expectations upon ourselves, we sentence ourselves to a jail in our mind, a cell block in which we are bound to feel guilty because we could have never accomplished what we wish.

Caregivers in particular can often expect way too much of themselves and beat themselves up when they feel they haven’t fulfilled the high expectations they imposed on themselves. Sometimes, they can take full responsibility when the unavoidable end to the illness actually happens, and in doing so, take responsibility for something over which they had no control or power whatsoever. The fact is that none of us have the power over life and death that we want to have, or wished we had, or think we had. These self-inflicted emotional wounds can plunge us into despair.

I believe that the best thing we can do to address guilt is to talk about it. Quite often when we can get out of our own heads, which created the scenario that convicted us, we can get objective feedback which may help to lighten the sentence. Then bit by bit, we can address it further. Talking to an understanding friend, a therapist, a spiritual director, or member of the clergy, and even in group, can be most helpful in bearing the burden of guilt.

I have gone to the gravesite of loved ones to talk through some of my guilt, and I have found that quite helpful. Sometimes we may feel the need to apologize for whatever it is that is weighing on our souls, and perhaps we can visualize them forgiving us. People frequently regret having left something unsaid or undone in their relationship with their lost loved ones. We can still say what we need to say, and we don't have to go to a gravesite. We can do it anywhere really, as long as we allow ourselves the opportunity. **We also need to take into account what we did do. What we did right. What we did out of love. We need to remember how much we loved them and would have done anything to change the outcome if we could. We need to recall all the little things we did to help and support them.** Grief has a way to make us forget all the good and focus on the negative. Try to give it a more loving spin- one that is compassionate toward yourself. Try to show yourself the same kind of understanding and forgiveness you would show a close friend or relative.

We need to remember that whatever our loved ones experienced before they died is over for them now, they are not suffering anymore. Our brains will keep revisiting what happened, it is inevitable and even necessary, but usually the shoulda, woulda, couldas tend to soften over time (however there is no timeline), but perhaps when our minds go back there, we can be a bit more compassionate to ourselves, a bit more understanding, a bit more loving and gentle. We are only human. We can only do that which we are capable of doing. "In these unusual times, even the wisest among us often don't know what the right courses of action are. If you're experiencing guilt as part of your grief process, it can be important to remind yourself that nobody is perfect even under ideal circumstances, let alone the far-from-perfect world we're currently living in." (David B. Feldman PhD., Psychology Today)

***God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.***

Peace and Serenity,

Kevin