

August 8, 2021

Survivor's Guilt

Dear Friends,

“Survivor’s guilt tells you that you have done something wrong for merely surviving something tragic.” (Akua Boateng, PhD, LPC, *Healthline*)

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that I would address the issue of ‘survivor’s guilt’ and particularly how it has emerged dramatically during the pandemic. After 9-11, we had a very similar uprising in survivor’s guilt, and now, not surprisingly, it’s happening again. Originally, survivor’s guilt was typically associated with war and the soldiers who survived while countless others did not. But survivor’s guilt is really a culmination of the feelings of shame or regret by any person who has lived through a crisis or served as a first responder during one. In my experience, I truly believe that anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one can experience survivor’s guilt to some degree regardless of the circumstances. This type of guilt is a bit different from ‘ordinary’ guilt, if you will, as it can take many different forms such as “discomfort with feeling joy or positive emotions, regret for actions taken or not taken, a nagging voice that wonders ‘why me?’ when others didn’t make it. It’s common after natural disasters or mass tragedies, even when the survivor isn’t directly responsible for the event in question.” (Tali Berliner, PhD, *It’s Time to Talk About Survivor’s Guilt*, NY Times)

During the past year, I could not help but to notice that survivor’s guilt has reared its ugly head sometimes outwardly and sometimes more subtly in group member’s who have lost loved ones to Covid. Like most guilt in general, survivor’s guilt can “give people a false sense of control in the wake of senseless events that leave survivors feeling helpless.” (Abigail Nathanson, MSW, NPR) In all our losses we can sometimes experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, and we often seek, even subconsciously, to somehow obtain some control, some participation in what is happening. “The thinking,” says Nathanson, “is ‘I am not powerless if it was my fault, and I made a mistake.’” I have found this narrative to take similar forms: ‘I should have taken her to the hospital sooner,’ ‘I know I brought that firkin virus into

our home,' 'I should have pushed for different meds,' 'We should have never gone to that party,' 'I know I gave it to her/him,' 'I don't think I did everything I could have,' 'We removed life support too soon,' ... You get the picture. "With survivor's guilt, there is no single wrong to atone for or person to make amends to. It's an ongoing argument with a faceless inner judge."
(Tali Berliner)

There is also a lot of fear infused into survivor's guilt as often we can become afraid to go back into a world we no longer trust, so quite often we hold onto the guilt and the feeling of responsibility. As I've mentioned in many previous reflections, quite often we can choose to hold onto the pain because on some level we believe that this is all we have left of the person who died. In some ways the pain can become them. In a sense, we can come to believe that the pain is the only bond we can feel between ourselves and our loved one. We can come to the twisted conclusion that living without the pain would somehow make their life unimportant or forgotten; that if we let go of the pain, we will lose them completely and forever. In time, we can learn that the pain in grief is not them and we will never let go of those we love. "Guilt alone doesn't make anything better; it doesn't bring anyone back. Its value, experts say, is in directing our attention to what truly matters to us." (Tali Berliner, NY Times) We can gradually give ourselves permission to release the pain and guilt while holding onto them in our hearts and souls, in our memories and in our lives. The pain is not them. All this is what I call 'stinkin thinkin,' but it happens to the best of us, and it can be addressed and healed with good resources and support.

"It makes sense that it would be so challenging and so dysregulating to try to navigate a world that got turned upside down seemingly overnight," says Nathanson. While we may find ourselves navigating through some, or all, of these difficult feelings and emotions, it is very important for us to have self-compassion and to be gentle and kind to ourselves, trying not to judge our own feelings and emotions that emerge as they are necessary to our healing. Pushing our pain and guilt aside usually makes it more likely that we can stay stuck in the feelings of crisis. We need to allow ourselves to feel these difficult emotions and somehow share them or write about them in order to begin to release them. We need to know that we are not going crazy and that all of this is 'normal' in grief, especially now.

Nathanson says, “survivors should ask themselves: ‘What keeps you going? What is something that’s more important than your daily struggles? Survivors should think about ‘how you show up in the world and what you want to accomplish and what you want to be.’” “The question,” says Dr. Tali Berliner, “is how to transform those feelings into a force that helps the survivor move forward, rather than trapping them in the past.” She recommends that we try to reframe the question, “Why was I spared? To “How can I use the fact that I was spared?” and leverage that into something meaningful.” I have seen this happen more times to ever believe it’s not possible. It takes work, it involves choice, it often helps to have a good therapist who is trained in trauma and grief counseling and perhaps uses therapeutic techniques such as EMDR, brainspotting, and neurofeedback, which allow emotions to be processed at an unconscious level. It is very important to have good support overall as we take baby steps toward our new futures.

In an article from Healthline Health News, Arianna Galligher, LISW, offers the following advice:

- Give yourself permission to feel and express your emotions
- Challenge the impulse to isolate. Access support from others
- Instead of asking “Why me?” try “Why not me?”
- Explore ways to express gratitude or do something good for others
- Practice being kind to yourself
- Use compassionate self-talk
- Prioritize self-care
- Seek to support those that you feel are in need or could benefit from your help
- Forgive yourself for being on the other side of the circumstances that are outside of your control
- Have compassion, for you are doing your level best to deal with the ruins of post-traumatic experience

Let's conclude in a most appropriate way as we share this meaningful prayer:

*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.*

Peace and Serenity, Kevin