



Dealing with Guilt When a Child Dies

Dear parents,

*Experiencing guilt when a loved one dies occurs so often that it is considered a normal part of grieving. However, Dr. Kubler-Ross has said that guilt may also be one of the **most painful** parts of grieving. This pamphlet was created to help you deal with the guilt that might otherwise overwhelm you after the accident, sickness or death of your child.*



Remember that when the death occurred, you were doing the best that you could at the time. (Schiff, p.44; Baugher, p. 33)

According to psychotherapist Helen Fitzpatrick, it is important to make a distinction between guilt and regret. They are closely related and it is difficult to deal with both of them at the same time. Did you really do something wrong on purpose (**guilt**) or do you regret not having done something that you would have liked to do (**regret**)?

We may always have regrets, but that is different from being guilty of doing something wrong. This distinction may help to diminish your feeling of guilt.

There are many kinds of guilt that you may experience. The first six are from research with bereaved parents conducted by Margaret Miles & Alice Demi (p. 105).

Death causation guilt:

The feeling that it was somehow your fault is common, especially initially, as you seek answers to why, how, who and if only...

“I should not have allowed him to go so far on his bike.”

Guilt related to the illness:

“I should have noticed his symptoms sooner.”

Guilt related to the parental role of protector:

“I am his father and am responsible for anything that happens to him.”

Survivor guilt:

“I should have died instead of him.”

Grieving guilt:

“I’m crying too much [or not enough].”

Moral guilt:

“I am being punished because I’m guilty of a past moral sin.”

Feeling better guilt: (Schiff, p.124-127; Baugher, p. 27)

“I feel guilty that I am feeling better.”

“I must be heartless to feel better, how could a good parent feel better, be at peace?”

“A good parent should grieve continuously and never allow joy to come into his life.”

Going forward guilt:

Planning for another child does not mean that you have forgotten the child who died.

The natural evolution of guilt

A healthy resolution of guilt: Most parents eventually realize that it is impossible to control everything in life and that when the event took place, they were doing the best they could, under the circumstances.

Unhealthy progression of guilt: Some parents go from feeling guilt to feeling shame. Feeling ashamed of who you *are* could lead a person to self-destructive behaviors.

Another unhealthy progression of guilt.

Blaming others can be used to avoid looking at one’s own feelings of guilt.

Most of the following suggested ways to cope with guilt are from the book “Understanding Guilt during Bereavement” and are reprinted here with permission of the author psychologist Dr. Bob Baugher. To order his 53-page book go to: b_kbaugher@yahoo.com

The helpfulness of these strategies may vary from person to person.

1. Understand that it is normal to feel guilt.

(Miles & Demi; p. 113, Baugher, p. 30)

2. Share your feelings and thoughts with others.

Don’t carry your burden alone; find someone who knows how to listen.

(Schiff, p.44; Miles & Demi, p.113; Baugher p.46)

3. Letting go of your guilt or grief doesn’t mean you are letting go of your child. (Schiff, p.124-127; Baugher, p. 39)

Letting go of your guilt simply means that you are rejecting any negative emotions that stop you from living life fully.

4. Allow yourself to express your guilt. Analyze what you are saying by your guilt. How and why are you blaming yourself? Does it make sense rationally?

5. Explain your actions rationally and underline your good intentions (Miles & Demi, p.114). That is realize that when the event took place, you were doing the best you could under the circumstances.

You did not intend to do anything wrong

Your actions were loving actions

You can’t control everything

You are not a doctor

You can’t keep your children in a bubble or glass cage.

Peebles-Kleiger writes that blaming oneself builds the illusion that control is possible. But can we really control everything, or do we only wish we could?



If working on your guilt rationally doesn't seem to help, here are additional suggestions from Dr. Bob Baugher as well as from Margaret Miles and Alice Demi. As we did on the previous page, we have included page numbers for those of you who wish to read the full text in Baugher's book or in the Miles & Demi article.

6. Learn to forgive yourself:

(Miles & Demi, p. 114; Baugher, p. 41)

- Stop punishing yourself.
- There are no perfect parents.
- Learn to accept your qualities as well as your imperfections.

Many are comforted by the thought that their child would not want to see them suffer all their life or be unhappy.

Write in a journal or write a letter to your child telling them about your regrets and your need to be forgiven by them.

You may also find forgiveness through spiritual beliefs and the help of a spiritual advisor.

7. Think ahead of how to respond to what people might say that may cause you to feel guilty.

(Baugher, p. 36)

8. Letting go of guilt is a decision that you consciously make. You cannot blame yourself unceasingly. Consider the following:

- Put your guilt "on hold" for 1 hour to see how it feels. (Baugher, p. 44)
- Plan a future date at which point you will stop blaming yourself with negative self-talk. (Baugher, p. 45)

9. Use the approach of a best friend: what would you say to your best friend if he or she experienced the same type of guilt? (Baugher, p. 42)

10. Analyze, decrease and eliminate all forms of self-punishment. Why are you blaming yourself? When you punish yourself, ask yourself how might it be affecting others? Are you willing to let go of some of the self-punishing behaviors? (Baugher, p. 43)

11. Banish all "I should have" or "I shouldn't have" from your vocabulary, since you can't change the past. Instead, ask yourself, what can I do now? What have I learned to do differently in the future? (Miles & Demi, p. 114; .Baugher, p. 35)

12. Focus on the positives in your relationship with your child.

Any time you begin to focus on guilt, change your focus to a positive thought about something good that you did during your child's life. (Miles & Demi, p.115; Baugher, p. 32)

These memories will help you realize that despite this terrible event, your child had many wonderful moments of joy, happiness and love.

13. Find ways to channel your guilt into something positive. Do something significant, in your child's name. (Miles & Demi, p. 115); Baugher, p. 48)



Remember that you did the best you could and that it is impossible to control everything in life.

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Important notice

The information presented in this document is not intended to replace the advice of a health care professional or physician. Please talk to a qualified professional for all questions related to your health.



A Review of the Literature on Guilt

by

Teresa Gerez, Nurse

Jeremy Rill Centre

for SIDS and Sudden Infant Death

McGill University Health Center

Montréal, Quebec, Canada

With input from Dr. Bob Baugher, author of the book *Understanding Guilt during Bereavement*

Each of us must find our own way in grief. "*Grief is an experience that is ongoing, that changes in nature over time, but that involves a continuing relationship with the loved one. As part of you wants to go forward, another part tends to go back into the past and to hang onto memories*" (Moules).

For those who feel they are stuck in one place, not moving forward, the help of a skilled professional may be useful.



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Centre universitaire de santé McGill
McGill University Health Centre

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