

Grief Notes

June 2024

Guilt and Regret in Grief by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

A loved one has died. Do you regret something? Do you feel guilty about something? Are you thinking about the things you wish you had done or said? Are you haunted by the things you wish you had not done or said? If you are, you are not alone.

We often judge ourselves or are aware of being judged by others. If you have been a caregiver, then you know the emotional and physical exhaustion that comes with that role. You may wish you had been more patient, you had spoken more kind and loving words, you had not lost your temper. If you were not the person there every day doing the work or caregiving, you may wish you had been more present, had visited more often, had called more often. If the end-of-life journey was long and painful, you may feel relief when the suffering is over. You may be at peace with that relief, or you may feel guilty about it.

These understandable and very human feelings can be uncomfortable to live with as we judge ourselves and find ourselves lacking. We question if we made the best choices we could have at the time. We know we cannot go back in time and change what happened. We wonder if life would be different in a better way if we had acted differently. Others telling us to stop being hard on ourselves doesn't really help.

Feelings of guilt and regret in grief are very common. It is the rare person who has nothing to regret after a loved one dies and has no guilt about something that should or should not have been done. These thoughts are often sources of great pain as the past cannot be changed and the person who died is no longer present so amends cannot be made. Before the death we struggle to do the best we can, and after the death we struggle with our feelings of sadness as well as thinking about all that happened in those last days, weeks, and months. Unfinished business is common. We thought we would have more time to sort things out and then death occurs sooner than we thought it would and there is no more time.

Here are some suggestions to help when struggling with guilt or regret:

- Talk with supportive friends and family, especially ones who will let you have your feelings without trying to talk you out of them. A good listener is a treasure.
- Attend a grief support group. Having people outside your circle who are going through the same thing helps you feel understood and provides a chance to learn from others.
- Write about your feelings in journals or letters.
- Read about grief (and find you are not alone in your struggles.)
- Attend to your faith and spiritual supports
- See a professional counselor, especially if your struggle is making everyday difficult
- Practice forgiveness of yourself and others