

Coping with Regret and Guilt Following a Loss

Objective

To identify ways to cope with regret and guilt.

What to Know

When you lose a loved one, you might experience many emotions along with grief – including guilt and regret. Grief, guilt, and regret work together to complicate your grieving process. It can help to separate each from the other to process your grief more effectively.

Both guilt with regret can occur while you try to make sense of the loss, revisit details about the death, and wonder how this could have happened. Blaming yourself, experiencing survivor's guilt, or wishing you had done things differently is natural. During this process you might realize you made mistakes or identify things you could have done differently.

Guilt can lead to self-punishment and isolation while keeping you focused on the past. Perhaps you have done something wrong, but you might also blame yourself for things over which you had no control.

Regret happens when you focus on the past and the things you would have done differently if you had known then what you know now. Regret can include self-blame, sadness, anger, and feeling at fault.

Here are some suggestions to cope with guilt and regret.

- **Talk about how you feel.** Talk to someone you trust who is unbiased to get a different perspective. This might be a therapist, coach, or friend. This person might remind you that you did the best you could. You might not remember exactly how things were – or you forget all the things you did right. Trust that you are not to blame and begin the process of letting these feelings go.
- **Write about your feelings.** Using a journal or notebook, sort through your feelings and identify if you are feeling guilty or regretful. Remember the things you did right and all the positive memories you have. You can begin by asking yourself, “Is my guilt realistic or unrealistic? If it is realistic, were my actions intentional or unintentional?” and “What do I regret?” You do not have to share your answers with anyone.
- **Write a letter.** Express how you feel to your deceased loved one, expressing your feelings about the good things and what you wish you could have said or done. Put this letter in a special place, bury it, or read it aloud and dispose of it.
- **Find a way to make amends.** When you cannot directly make up for wrongdoings, you can make amends by changing your behavior. “Living amends” refers to living in a way that acknowledges your mistakes by consistently behaving in ways to make up for what you did – all while not repeating your mistakes.

- **Ask for forgiveness.** Have a conversation with your deceased loved one and apologize. It will be one-sided but maintaining the bond after death can be healing.
- **Apologize to others.** If your regret or guilt involves people who are living, sort out any unexpressed apologies. If you can act, do it, or say what needs to be said – even if you feel embarrassed or ashamed.
- **Forgive yourself.** Accept that you make mistakes and have lapses in judgment. No good comes from feeling awful over something you cannot change. Instead, forgive yourself. You might say, “I’ve suffered for the decisions I have made, yet I’m willing to forgive myself and move on. I allow myself to heal and grow from this experience.” Self-forgiveness includes demonstrating the following to yourself:
 - **Self-empathy.** You might be your own worst critic. Remind yourself that everyone makes mistakes, and no one is perfect.
 - **Kindness.** Showing kindness involves stopping negative self-talk and harsh judgment.
 - **Self-compassion.** Be understanding toward yourself when you fail, make mistakes, or suffer. Stop evaluating yourself and labeling your actions as “good” or “bad.” Learn to accept yourself as you are, that you are learning and growing every day.
 - **Understanding.** Understand your strengths and weaknesses, your fears and motivations, and your tolerances and boundaries.
- **Connect with loved ones.** Reconnect with loved ones whom you have alienated in the past. The death of a loved one can sometimes open the door to reestablishing severed connections.
- **Look for the lesson.** Guilt and regret can inspire you to become a better person, teach you compassion, and increase your empathy. Maybe you will choose to show appreciation to loved ones or say, “I love you,” more frequently.
- **Cultivate gratitude.** While you cannot change the past, you can be grateful for it. Affirm the good memories and aspects of your relationship with the deceased person. Gratitude allows you to experience and celebrate the lasting effects of this person’s life.
- **Seek support.** There are online grief support groups if the support is unavailable in your community.

The grieving process can become complicated when you have regrets or feel guilt. **Remember – no matter what you did or said, you CAN find forgiveness, healing, and peace.** This worksheet can help you identify ways to cope with the painful feelings of regret and guilt.

What to Do

Who can you talk to about your regret or guilt? _____

Are you interested in an online support group? _____ You can even join groups anonymously. Try www.griefanonymous.com, www.griefshare.org, or www.mygriefangels.org

Explain why you are feeling regret, guilt, or both.

Write down all the positive things that made your relationship with your loved one special.

Are you willing to write in a journal or notebook, or write a letter to your deceased loved one? _____ If so, choose either journaling or writing a letter to express your feelings. Describe your experience below.

Do you think making a “living amends” will help you? Why or why not? What can you do?

If you regret not spending enough time with the deceased person, acknowledge the time you did spend together. Write about the times you shared.

If you failed to find the closure or forgiveness you were hoping for, you can make up for things that you did not say or do when they were alive by living your life in ways that honor your loved one. Some examples are:

- If you did not express your love for them, start by saying it often to the people who are still in your life.
- Become a better grandparent, sibling, or child.

What can you do?

Focus on this moment and not on past experiences, thoughts, or thinking patterns. Bring your thoughts and awareness to the present moment. Sit quietly and pay attention to your breathing. Notice your inhales and exhales. Do this at least ten minutes a day for two weeks. Describe your experience.

What else can you do to cope with regret and guilt?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
