

# Exploring Guilt in Suicide Bereavement

Rebecca L. Sanford, PhD, RCSW, RCC

HeartLight Center

Signature Series

February 2026





# Overview

- What Guilt Is and Is Not
- Common Sources of Guilt in Suicide Loss and How Guilt Impacts the Bereavement Journey
- Questions, Prompts, and Activities to Support Exploration of Guilt in the Service of Healing



# Housekeeping

- Opportunities for questions and discussion
- Feel free to use the chat for questions and comments, and we'll have time for questions at the end
- Slides will be sent out to everyone after
- Be mindful of your wellness and take care of yourself as needed
- Please excuse any cat related interruptions 😊





# Exploring Guilt

- We're not necessarily trying to take away the guilt or get rid of it completely—perhaps you are ready to release it but it's okay if you aren't!
- May be more realistic to simply explore and reconsider your relationship to guilt
- Even the most painful and difficult emotions serve a purpose
- And we often hold onto the harder parts of our journey as long as they serve a purpose for us
- Invite the part of you that is open to feeling a bit less guilty to be here today



# What Guilt Is and Is Not





*"Negative events seen as caused by other people evoke **anger**; negative events seen as caused by oneself evoke **guilt** (or regret if no one else is hurt); negative events seen as caused by fate, or chance, or circumstances beyond anyone's control evoke **sorrow**."*

*(Kubany & Watson, 2003)*

*"Guilt is two things—guilt involves **unpleasant or comfortable feelings**, and it also involves a set of **beliefs, cognitions, interpretations, and negative value judgments** about the self. Because guilt has both thinking and feeling components, we could just as appropriately say 'I think guilty' as 'I feel guilty.' However, it is probably more technically correct to say, '**I experience guilt.**'"*

*(Kubany & Manke, 1995)*



# Guilt

- Thoughts AND feelings
- Complex experience best thought of as a cluster of thoughts and emotions rather than one specific emotion



# Guilt

- Unpleasant feeling with accompanying beliefs that one should have thought, felt, or acted differently
- Sense of being personally responsible or accountable for violating a standard or failing to live up to one's expectations
- Often comes from acting out of alignment with our values



# Guilt

- Involves wrongdoing – both **actual/real** AND **perceived/imagined** – in which people believe their **actions** or **inaction** contributed to negative outcomes



# Guilt

- Considered a **secondary emotion**
- Secondary emotions often arise in response to primary emotions that are painful and difficult to experience
- Secondary emotions can **help us feel more control** over primary emotions



# Guilt

- When we're sad, there's nothing to do but feel sad—guilt gives us something to think about (which may feel productive)
- Guilt may mask or cover some of the more vulnerable primary emotions stirring under the surface



# Guilt

- **Real guilt** is based on actual wrongdoing (action or inaction) recognized by others
- **Irrational guilt** is based on unfounded magnification of minor wrongdoings or perceived wrongdoings with no basis in reality



Shame

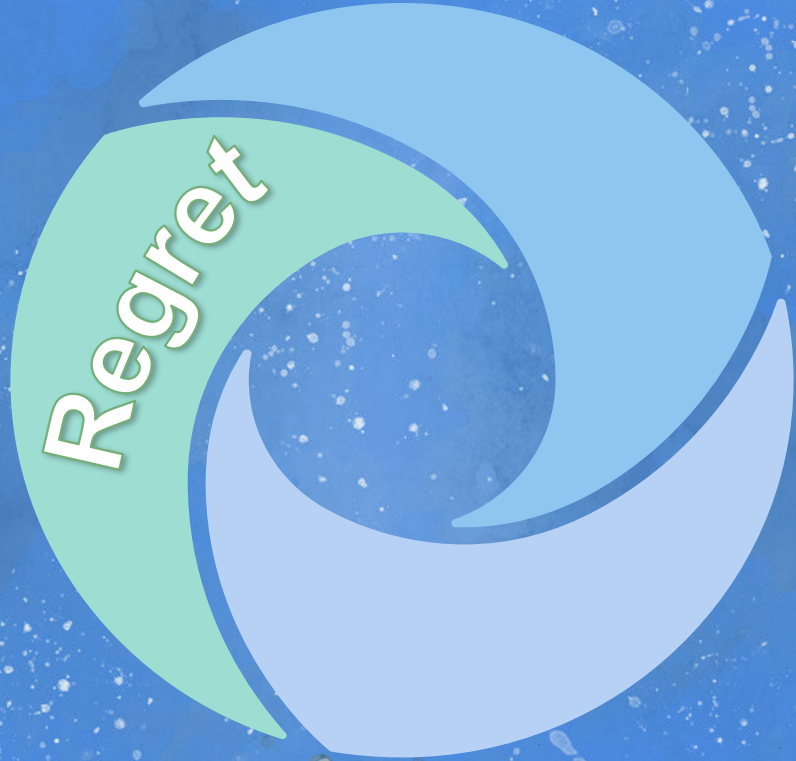
*"Guilt and shame tend to be yoked in trauma because when survivors implicate themselves as playing a significant role in tragic, irreparable outcomes, **they are also prone to conclude that 'the outcomes reflect on their entire selves, personality, or character.'**"*

*(Kubany & Watson, 2003)*



# Shame

- **Shame** is focused on the **person**, while guilt is focused primarily on behaviours (actions or inactions)
- Shame **may be triggered by a specific event, failure, or wrongdoing**, though we think about the cause being connected to the self or who we are at the core rather than specific actions (what we did/didn't do)
- Shame often involves self-condemnation





# Regret

- Negative emotion accompanied by the belief that we could have done something different that would have led to a more positive outcome in terms of the relationship with the person or the events related to the death



# Regret

- Regret is a very natural reaction to any negative outcome we might experience
- Regret often occurs based on hindsight – wish we could have done something differently based on information we learn later
- Often a result of what we later see as a missed opportunity
- Sometimes feels like unfinished business (what we wish we would have said/done if only we knew)

Thoughts and feelings related to missed opportunities, not specific wrongdoing (wish I would have)



Guilt is a complex mix of thoughts and feelings related to the sense of having done something wrong or being personally responsible or accountable for violating a standard or for failing to live up to one's expectations (I should have)

While guilt is about specific actions/ inactions, shame is a negative evaluation of oneself as a person at a core level



# Common Sources of Guilt in Suicide Loss and How Guilt Impacts Bereavement



# Common Sources of Guilt

- Belief that one contributed to the death directly or indirectly, sometimes called **death causation guilt**
  - For some people this may involve an in-depth review of history, going as far back in time as the person's birth
  - Another word to describe this kind of guilt is **self-blame**
- Belief that one did not do enough to prevent the death



# Common Sources of Guilt

- Belief that we are responsible for the wellbeing of others, sometimes called **omnipotent responsibility guilt**
- Belief that one did not live up to expectations from self or others about the role one had with the person who died, sometimes called **role guilt**
  - For example, the role as a spouse, parent, or friend



# Common Sources of Guilt

- Belief that one should have died first or that the death was out of step with the way things are supposed to go, sometimes called **survivor guilt**
- Guilt related to holding negative or ambivalent thoughts about the person or having unresolved business with the person who died
  - Quite common when there was a complicated or conflicted relationship history, especially if the person had struggles with mental health or substance use before they died



# Common Sources of Guilt

- Belief that one is violating a standard because of ability to laugh or find joy or contentment after a loss, sometimes called **recovery guilt**
- Belief that one is not grieving correctly or behaving appropriately as a grief person, sometimes called **grief guilt** and may be related to social expectations around grief and how people are “supposed” to think/feel/act when grieving

# Other Factors that Can Contribute to Guilt


- Circumstances connected to the death (for example, ongoing struggle with suicidality, talking about suicide, or multiple suicide attempts before the death), where perhaps it feels like we should have known it could happen
- Blame from others in their effort to make sense of what has happened
- Suicide prevention messaging, while well intentioned, often contributes to feelings of guilt in loss survivors (for example, suicide is preventable)





# The Impact of Guilt

- Guilt is connected to negative outcomes for people who are grieving, including depression, PTSD, and prolonged grief

A watercolor illustration on the left side of the page. It features a vibrant green leaf with detailed vein patterns, positioned above a hand holding a brown, textured rock. The background is a soft, light blue and white wash, suggesting a sky or a misty atmosphere. The overall style is artistic and gentle.

# Questions, Prompts, and Activities to Support Exploration of Guilt



**Self-Compassion**

**Learning About Guilt**

**Forgiveness**

**Getting to Know Your Guilt**

**Addressing Thinking Patterns**

**Honoring Guilt**

Consider your capacity to engage in any of these activities. It's okay if it's not a fit right now. And consider enlisting support for engaging with any of the suggestions, such as a therapist or caring friend.



# Learning About Guilt

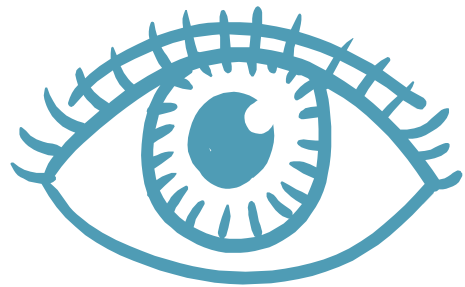
- What guilt is and is not – differentiating between guilt, regret, and shame
- Guilt as a secondary emotion and a way to possibly avoid more painful emotions connected to the loss
- Sources of guilt in bereavement



# Getting to Know Your Guilt

- Visualization
- Letter Writing

# Visualization



- Exercise to personify the guilt as separate from oneself to get a bit of distance from it
- Guilt includes thoughts and feelings, and sometimes we identify strongly with these thoughts and feelings—we may even assume we ARE our thoughts and feelings
- This exercise is intended to help us picture or see our guilt differently, or at least as somewhat separate from ourselves
- Instructions are flexible and adaptable—change it as needed to fit for you

# Visualization Instructions

- *“Find a comfortable position for your body and close your eyes if it feels safe and okay to do so, otherwise just relax your gaze towards the floor.*
- *Imagine yourself in a neutral space—a space where you don’t have any specific emotions attached to it.*
- *And then imagine your guilt is there with you. We’re just going to picture it for now. You don’t need to connect with it or try to understand it. We just want to see it and notice what it looks like.*
- *Notice the shape, colour, size, form of the guilt. Take in as much detail as you can. Notice where it is and how close it is to you.*
- *When you have as clear of a picture as possible, bring your attention back to your breath and then gently bring yourself back into the room.”*
- Consider drawing the image after you complete the visualization



# Visualization Instructions

- Can also do the visualization repeatedly over time, particularly to get to know your guilt better and get a bit of distance from it
- *How close does the guilt feel? How far away is it?*
- *How much distance/space is there between you and the guilt?*
- *What would it take to get a bit more space between you and the guilt?*

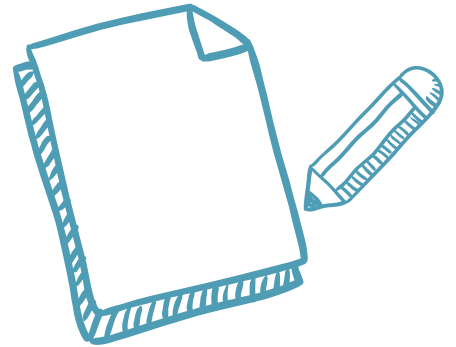


# Visualization Instructions

- Can use visualization to imagine a preferred alternate future relationship with the guilt, especially if it feels unchangeable in the present
- *And now picture yourself back in the neutral space with guilt. This time, consider that you are in the future where you have the relationship you want to have with your guilt. Imagine a preferred future scenario – this may be the near future, as in next month, or the distant future, say years down the road.*
- *Imagine the best case scenario or where you hope to be in terms of your guilt.*
- *What does your guilt look like? Has it changed in any way?*
- *Where is your guilt? How close or far away is it? How much distance/space is there between you and the guilt?*
- *How is your relationship with it?*

# Letter Writing

- Letter from Your Guilt
- Response Letter to Your Guilt
- Thank You Letter to Your Guilt





# Letter from Your Guilt

- Write a letter from the perspective of your guilt. You can imagine the creation/being/object that you visualized writing the letter as you consider these questions.
- What does your guilt want you to know?
- What does it have to say about why it is here?
- What is it trying to do?
- How is it trying to be helpful?
- What does it have to say about what it needs?



# Response Letter to Your Guilt

- Write directly in response to the guilt, addressing the points it raised in the initial letter.
- What do you want the guilt to know?
- What would you like to say to the guilt?
- Or if that feels too difficult, write from the perspective of a trusted friend or family member who cares about you.



# Thank You Letter to Your Guilt

- This practice is intended to support understanding the purpose of guilt by exploring how it has been helpful or has tried to be helpful (even as it is harmful in other ways). In the letter, acknowledge the ways it has tried to be helpful and what you would like it to know or do at this point.



# Honoring Guilt

- It is important to recognize how the guilt has been helpful for you – if we try to simply take it away without understanding how it is helping, it will likely pop up in another form (like Whack-A-Mole)
- Need to honor the ways that guilt has been helpful, or at least tried to be helpful



# How Might Guilt Be Helping?

- Guilt may offer us a sense of control
- Guilt may also give us a way to make sense of the senseless
- Guilt may offer us distraction or avoidance from the intense pain of grief
- Guilt may give us a way to punish ourselves



# How Might Guilt Be Helping?

- Guilt may help us feel connected to the person we lost through our suffering
- Guilt may feel like a mark of the depth of our love or how deeply we care about the person and their death
- Guilt may be our comfort zone



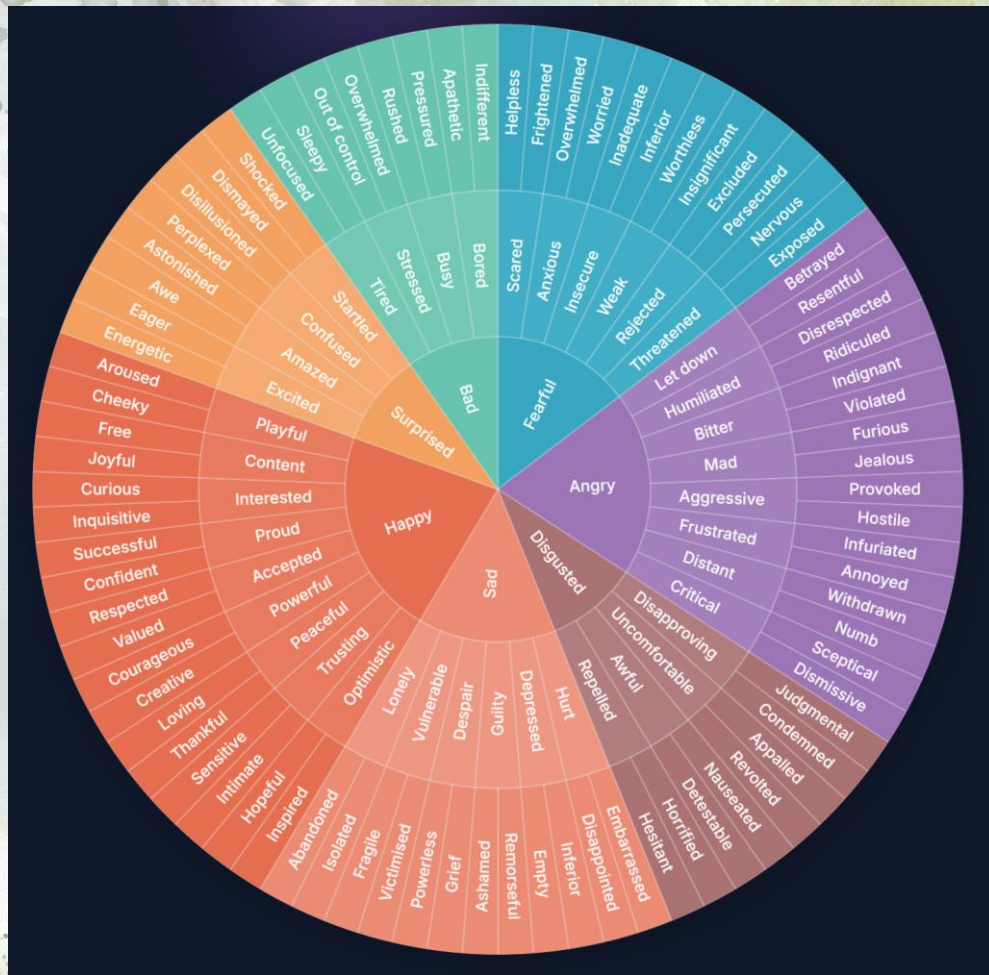
# Questions to Explore How Guilt Might be Trying to Help

- What might I lose if I no longer had guilt?
- What am I worried I might feel if I didn't have the guilt?
- What am I worried might happen if I didn't have the guilt?
- What I am afraid I might see/think/feel if I peel back the layer of guilt?
- What feelings are most uncomfortable for me to experience?
- How might guilt be protecting me from those feelings or thoughts?



# Build Capacity to Experience and Sit With More Painful Emotions Under the Guilt

- When guilt is a secondary emotion or serves the purpose of distracting from more painful emotions, we may need to support developing capacity to be present with the pain
- Understand what feeling may be under the guilt that may be more painful or difficult to experience that we may be trying to protect ourselves from
- Enhance ability to **identify feelings** and **experience and be present with more painful feelings directly**



# How We Feel

The How We Feel Project, Inc.

4.7★

3.76K reviews

500K+

Downloads



Everyone

Install on more devices



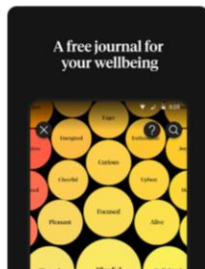
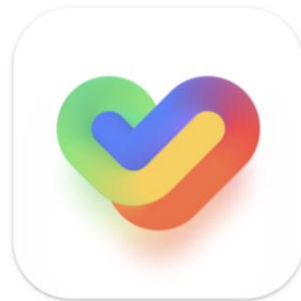
Share



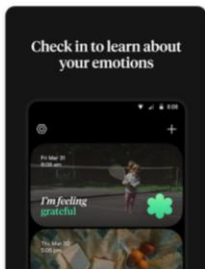
This app is available for your device



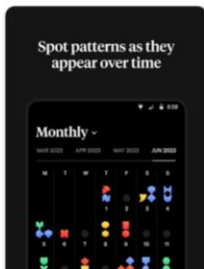
You can share this with your family. [Learn more about Family Library.](#)



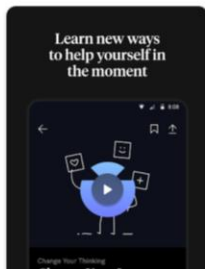
A free journal for your wellbeing



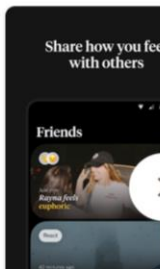
Check in to learn about your emotions



Spot patterns as they appear over time



Learn new ways to help yourself in the moment



Share how you feel with others

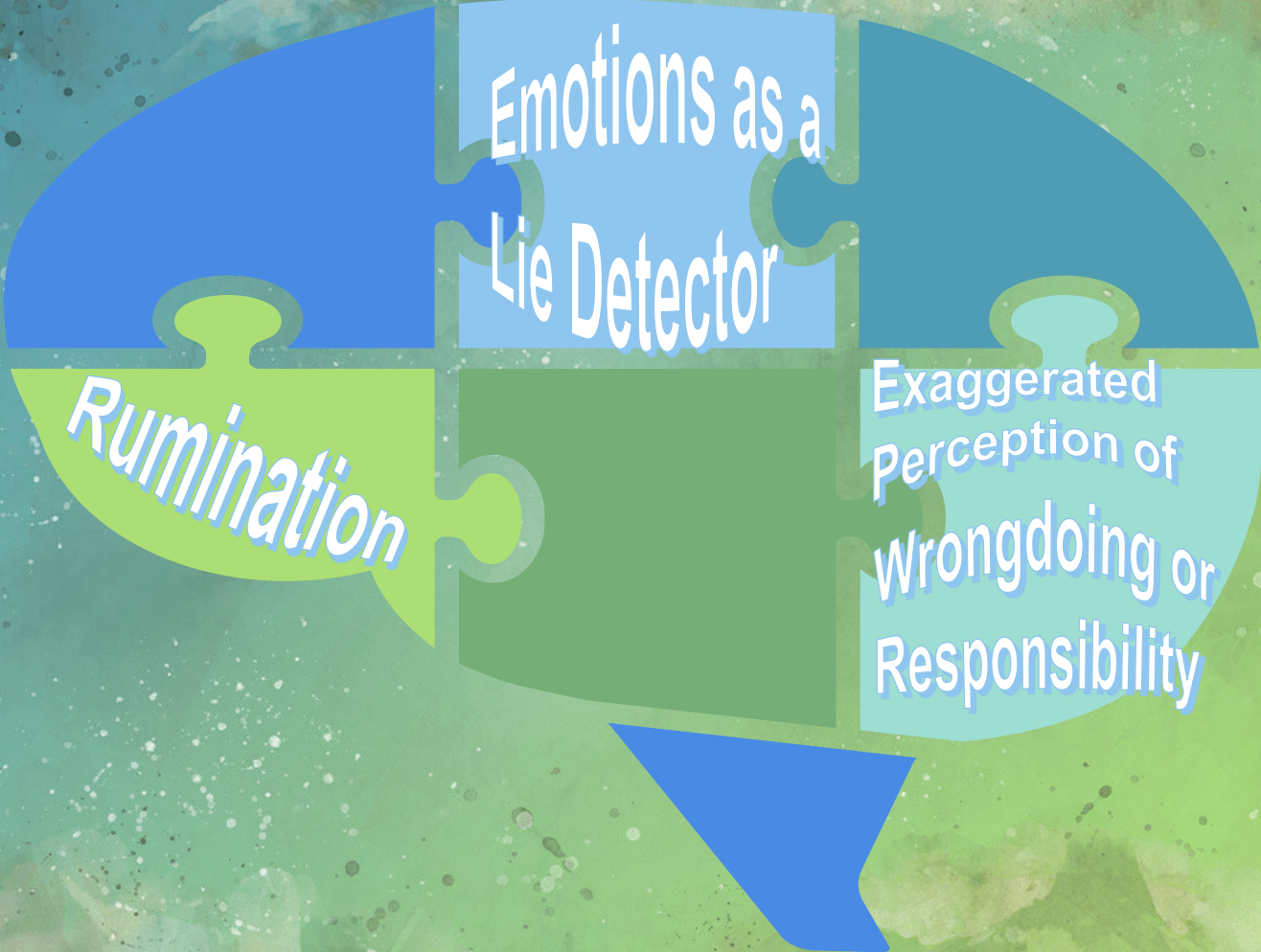
App support ▾

More apps to try →



CapCut: Photo & Video Editor  
Bytedance Pte. Ltd.  
3.4★

Available for FREE in Google Play and Apple Store



Emotions as a  
Lie Detector

*Rumination*

Exaggerated  
Perception of  
Wrongdoing or  
Responsibility

*"We don't see things as they are. We see them as **we** are."*

*~Anais Nin*



# Rumination

- Repeatedly and recurrently thinking about the loss, its consequences, and the negative emotions related to it



# Rumination

- **Reflection** includes thinking about the loss and emotions related to it with a more open and expansive perspective
- Reflection can lead to new insights, understandings, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings
- While **rumination** often involves revisiting the same aspects of the loss and associated feelings without shifts or changes



# Rumination

- Rumination is simply replaying the story over and over without any shifts or changes
- Reflection involves revisiting the story with openness to seeing it in a new or different way



# Rumination

- Rumination is considered an avoidance mechanism rather than a confrontation strategy, as it is a way of avoiding the reality of the loss and the most painful feelings involved
- It looks like leaning into the grief and confronting it directly, though it often only involves considering a narrow set of thoughts and feelings or focusing on one particular aspect of the loss
- It comes from a closed place, rather than an open mind, and it serves to reinforce beliefs instead of bringing about new insight



# Addressing Rumination

- Learning about rumination is important – what it is, how it is different from reflection, how to notice when it is happening, how to disrupt it
- Enhance self-awareness to notice when rumination is occurring – consider your own signs that tell you that you are on the hamster wheel
- Use distraction techniques to break the hamster wheel of rumination and shift the focus
- “I’m ruminating and I need to give my brain something else to do”



# Distraction Techniques

- Give your brain something else to do!
- Count backwards from 100 by 3s
- Find objects in the room with you and spell them backwards
- Find an object in the room and describe it in as much detail as possible
- Look at funny videos online



# Emotions as a Lie Detector

- This just means that we use our feelings to determine if something is true or not
- If we have an emotional reaction to a logical, rational statement or thought, especially an uncomfortable emotional reaction, then we assume that the statement or thought must not be true



# Emotions as a Lie Detector

- Classic head versus heart challenge
- It may sound something like: "In my head, I can see what you are saying, but I still feel in my heart that what I did was wrong (or that I'm to blame)."
- Often happens when we trust our feelings more than our thoughts or logical explanations
- \*\*Of course, our thoughts can be inaccurate too!




# Addressing Emotions as a Lie Detector

- Helpful to consider mantras and reminders:
  - “Feelings are feelings. Feelings are information. Feelings aren’t facts.”
- Explore what the feeling might be trying to offer or say
- Consider using “I think” instead of “I feel” language when talking about guilt
- Consider letter writing to have a conversation between your head and heart




# Exaggerated Perception of Wrongdoing or Responsibility

- Sometimes due to hindsight bias
- Irrational guilt is based on unfounded **magnification of minor wrongdoings** or **perceived wrongdoings** with no basis in reality




# Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Honestly explore your intentions for acting as you did in the moment, with a full review of what you knew or had access to at the time
- Consider whether your actions were aligned with your values
- Intentions are typically consistent with values




# Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Intentionality is important to consider in determining wrongdoing
- Wrongdoing typically involves intentionally causing harm or deliberately acting contrary to personal or societal values




# Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- It's true that we may have good intentions, but the impact of our actions/inactions unintentionally creates harm
- And also, it is a mistake to conclude wrongdoing on the basis of an unintended or unanticipated negative outcome rather than on the basis of what they were intending or trying to accomplish



# Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Working with a therapist who uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can be helpful to address thinking errors, particularly around what you actually knew or could do at the time of the death to support more accurate view of your responsibility
- Consider the weatherman analogy and the role of hindsight bias
- May be helpful to bring in language of regret



# Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Consider exploring poems and other writings that speak about guilt, particularly responsibility and wrongdoing

grab guilt's hands and remind it  
that it was not your job to make  
your time together perfect.

it was about letting it be real.

the tides rise and fall each day

and still we do not doubt

how much the ocean

loves the shore.

sara rian

# Guilt by Earl Grollman

"If only I had . . .  
treated the one I loved more kindly.  
called the doctor sooner.  
understood the full extent of the illness.  
taken better care of him or her.  
not lost my temper.  
expressed my affection more frequently."

When death comes, life is examined.

You become acutely aware of  
your failures, real or imagined.  
You want to rectify past errors.  
You wish to compensate for  
the wrongs you have committed.

Some people even punish themselves  
with self-destructive acts, as if to say:  
"See how much I am suffering.  
Doesn't this prove my great love?"

Self-recrimination becomes a way  
to undo all the things that  
make you now feel guilty.

And maybe you were guilty.

Perhaps you said things you should not have  
said.

Perhaps you neglected to do things you should  
have done.

But who hasn't?

What is past is past.  
It cannot be changed.  
You already have too much pain  
to add to the burden of self-  
accusation, self-reproach, and  
self-deprecation.

A wise member of the clergy once said,  
"I believe that God forgives you.

The question is:  
Will you forgive yourself?"



# Forgiveness

- With true guilt, finding a path to self-forgiveness can be important
- Forgiveness is tricky when we have lost someone – we can't make it right with the person directly
- Finding other ways to make amends may be helpful for addressing the corrective element of guilt
- Letter writing to a past version of yourself or person who died may be a way to explore forgiveness



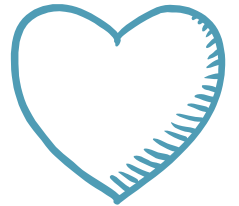
# Self-Compassion

- Self-kindness (instead of self-judgment)
- Common humanity (instead of isolation)
- Mindfulness (instead of overidentification)
  - Am I holding the thought or is the thought holding me?
  - Am I holding the guilt or is the guilt holding me?

# Self-Compassion

“Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with your failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect?” ~Kristin Neff

<https://self-compassion.org>



## References

- Albuquerque, S., Pereira, B. B., Coelho, A., & Pinto, R. (2025). Guilt and Unfinished Business in Bereavement: Rumination as a Pathway to Prolonged Grief and Trauma. *Journal of Clinical Medicine, 14*(23), 8582. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm14238582>
- Browne, K. C., Trim, R. S., Myers, U. S., & Norman, S. B. (2015). Trauma-Related Guilt: Conceptual Development and Relationship With Posttraumatic Stress and Depressive Symptoms. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 28*(2), 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21999>
- Camacho, D., Pérez Nieto, M. A., & Gordillo, F. (2020). Guilt and Bereavement: Effect of the Cause of Death, and Measuring Instruments. *Illness, Crisis & Loss, 28*(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1054137316686688>
- Camacho, D., Pérez-Nieto, M. Á., & Gordillo, F. (2018). The role of rumination in the guilt associated with bereavement according to cause of death. *Psychiatry Research, 270*, 1053–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.04.065>
- Herbert, M. S., Malaktaris, A. L., Lyons, R., & Norman, S. B. (2020). Trauma-related guilt and pain among veterans with PTSD. *Psychiatry Research, 285*, 112820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112820>
- Joa, B., & Newberg, A. B. (2023). Neuropsychological Comparison of Guilt and Grief: A Review of Guilt Aspects in Prolonged Grief Disorder. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 87*(2), 591–613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211024111>
- Keser, E., Ar-Karci, Y., & Danişman, I. G. (2024). Examining the Basic Assumption of Psychoanalytic Theory Regarding Normal and Abnormal Grief: Roles of Unfinished Businesses and Bereavement Related Guilt. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 90*(2), 783–804. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228221111946>

## References

- Kubany, E. S., & Manke, F. P. (1995). Cognitive therapy for trauma-related guilt: Conceptual bases and treatment outlines. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 2*(1), 27–61. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229\(05\)80004-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229(05)80004-5)
- Kubany, E. S., & Watson, S. B. (n.d.). *Guilt: Elaboration of a Multidimensional Model*.
- LeBlanc, N. J., Toner, E. R., O'Day, E. B., Moore, C. W., Marques, L., Robinaugh, D. J., & McNally, R. J. (2020). Shame, guilt, and pride after loss: Exploring the relationship between moral emotions and psychopathology in bereaved adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 263*, 405–412. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.11.164>
- Li, J., Stroebe, M., Chan, C. L. W., & Chow, A. Y. M. (2017). The Bereavement Guilt Scale: Development and Preliminary Validation. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 75*(2), 166–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815612309>
- Li, J., Tendeiro, J. N., & Stroebe, M. (2019). Guilt in bereavement: Its relationship with complicated grief and depression. *International Journal of Psychology, 54*(4), 454–461. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12483>
- Luck, T., & Luck-Sikorski, C. (2022). The wide variety of reasons for feeling guilty in adults: Findings from a large cross-sectional web-based survey. *BMC Psychology, 10*(1), 198. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00908-3>
- Norman, S. B., Haller, M., Kim, H. M., Allard, C. B., Porter, K. E., Stein, M. B., Venners, M. R., Authier, C. C., & Rauch, S. A. M. (2018). Trauma related guilt cognitions partially mediate the relationship between PTSD symptom severity and functioning among returning combat veterans. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 100*, 56–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2018.02.003>

## References

- Pugh, L. R., Taylor, P. J., & Berry, K. (2015). The role of guilt in the development of post-traumatic stress disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 182*, 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.04.026>
- Stroebe, M., Stroebe, W., Van De Schoot, R., Schut, H., Abakoumkin, G., & Li, J. (2014a). Guilt in Bereavement: The Role of Self-Blame and Regret in Coping with Loss. *PLoS ONE, 9*(5), e96606. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0096606>
- Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58*(1), 345–372. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145>
- Tilghman-Osborne, C., Cole, D. A., & Felton, J. W. (2010). Definition and measurement of guilt: Implications for clinical research and practice. *Clinical Psychology Review, 30*(5), 536–546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.007>
- Wagner, B., Hofmann, L., & Grafiadeli, R. (2021). The relationship between guilt, depression, prolonged grief, and posttraumatic stress symptoms after suicide bereavement. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 77*(11), 2545–2558. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23192>

*Questions,  
Reflections, or  
Thoughts?*

*Thank you!*  
*rsanford@tru.ca*  
*www.rebeccasanford.ca*