

Guilt and Suicide Grief: Supporting People Bereaved by Suicide

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Heartlight Center

Signature Series

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Overview

- What Guilt Is and Is Not
- Common Sources of Guilt in Suicide Loss, Things that Contribute to Guilt, and How it Impacts the Journey
- Resources, Strategies, and Interventions for Working with Guilt



Housekeeping

- Opportunities for questions and discussion
- Feel free to use the chat for questions and comments, and we'll have time for questions midway through and at the end
- Be mindful of your wellness and support grounding to present moment as needed
- Please excuse any cat related interruptions 😊



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 (commission)** or **inaction (omission)** 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 feels 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



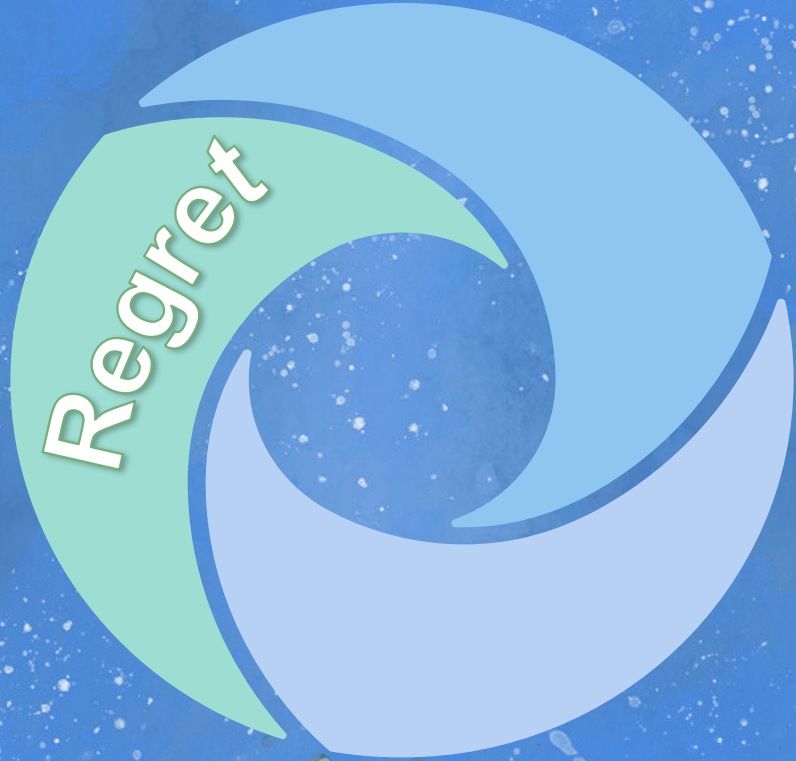
*"Guilt and shame tend to be yoked in trauma because when survivors implicate themselves as playing a significant role in tragic, irreparable outcomes, **they are also prone to conclude that 'the outcomes reflect on their entire selves, personality, or character.'**"*

(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 involves self-condemnation
- Shame may stem from powerlessness





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, Things that Contribute to Guilt, and How it 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 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



Emotions as a
Lie Detector

Rumination

Exaggerated
Perception of
Wrongdoing or
Responsibility



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



Emotions as a Lie Detector

- This just means that we use our feelings as a lie detector—if we have an emotional reaction to a thought, especially an uncomfortable emotional reaction, then we assume that the thought must not be true
- 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



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

Emotions as a
Lie Detector

Rumination

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

~Anais Nin

Other Factors that Can Contribute to Guilt

- Close proximity to or direct involvement in a negative event
- Harm caused to a close relationship partner or significant other
- Involvement in events that cause irreparable harm
- Human-caused negative events (versus acts of nature or God)



Other Factors that Can Contribute to Guilt


- Situations in which all available courses of action have negative consequences
- Negative events which produce outcomes that are arbitrary or unfair
- Blame from others



The Impact of Guilt

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

Questions?

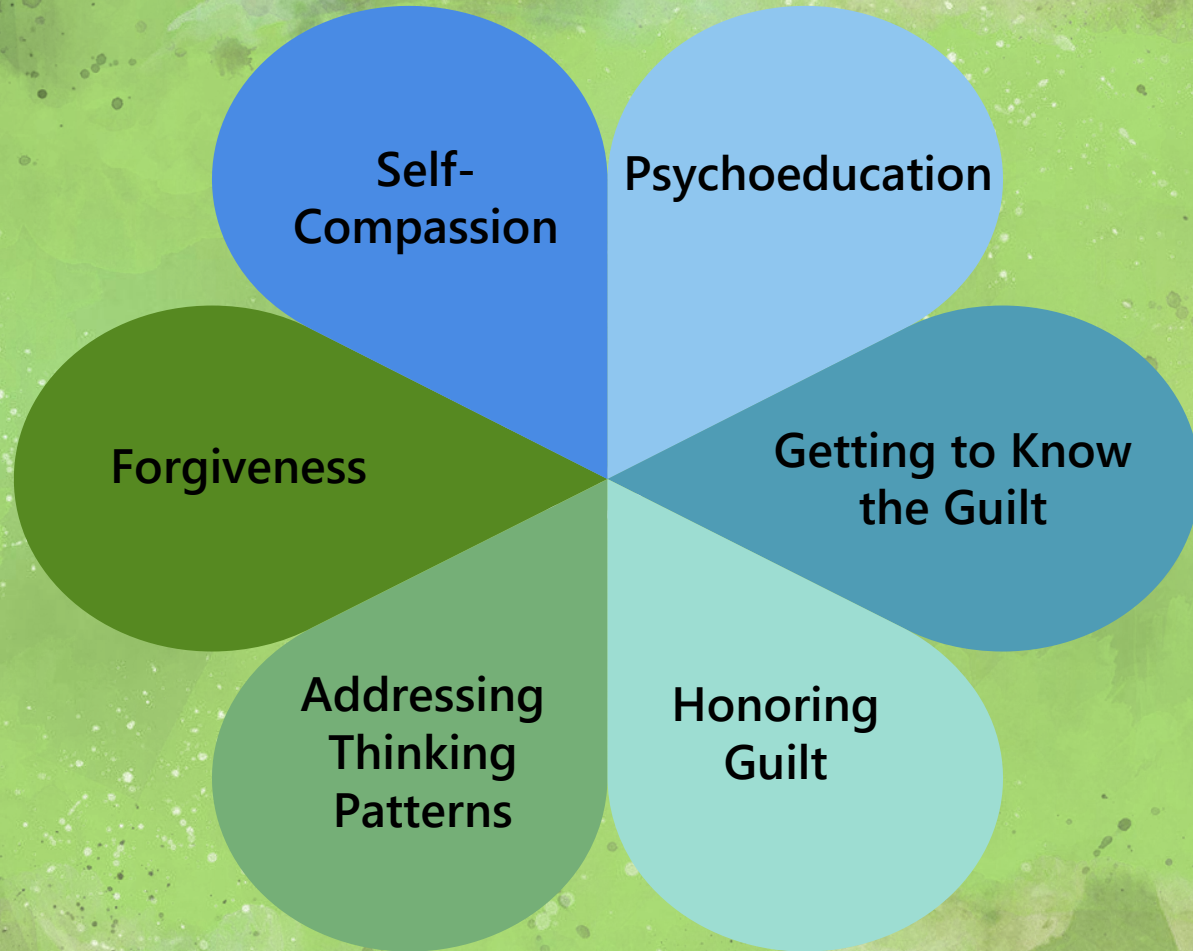
A watercolor illustration on the left side of the slide. It features a vibrant green leaf with detailed vein patterns, positioned above a hand holding a brown, textured rock. The background is a soft, light blue and white wash, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting. The overall style is artistic and serene.

Resources, Interventions, and Strategies for Working with Guilt



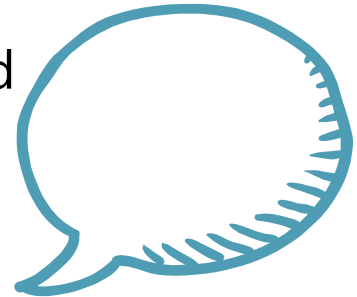
Working with Guilt

- Caution around the goal being to not feel guilty anymore
- May be enough to simply explore and reconsider the 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



Psychoeducation

- 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
- Thinking patterns that contribute to and perpetuate guilt

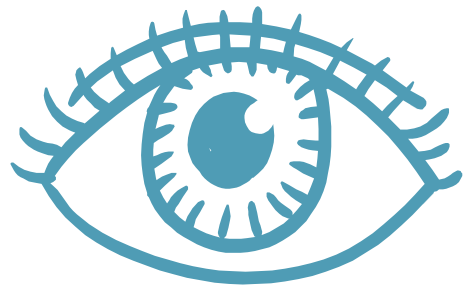




Getting to Know the Guilt

- Visualization
- Letter Writing or Empty Chair Technique

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



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.”*



Visualization Instructions

- Can have them draw the image after the visualization
- Can also repeat this over time, particularly to explore and assess distance
- *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?*

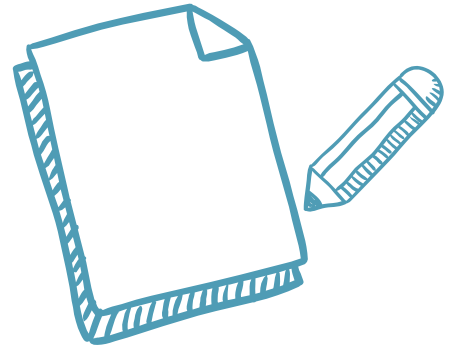


Visualization Instructions

- Can use this 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.*
- *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 (or Empty Chair)

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





Letter from the 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 does it have to say about what it needs?



Response Letter to the Guilt

- Write directly in response to the guilt, addressing the points it raised in the initial letter. 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 the 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 is helpful for the person – 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 Encounter 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 encounter more painful feelings directly



Address Thinking Patterns that Contribute to Guilt

- Rumination
- Emotions as a Lie Detector
- Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing



Addressing Rumination

- Psychoeducation about rumination – what it is, how it is different from reflection, how to notice when it is happening, how to disrupt it
- Support self-awareness to notice when rumination is occurring
- Distraction and disruption techniques to break the hamster wheel of rumination
- Dialectical Behavioral Therapy worksheets on distraction can be helpful




Addressing Rumination

- **This is also where addressing more painful feelings underneath may be important and helpful




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
- Facilitate conversation between head and heart (could use letter writing or visualization)




Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Irrational guilt is often based on unfounded magnification of minor wrongdoings or perceived wrongdoings with no basis in reality
- Explore their intentions for acting as they did
- Intentions are typically consonant with values




Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Intentionality is often the gauge against which wrongdoing is appraised
- Wrongdoing is most frequently assigned when an individual has intentionally caused harm or has deliberately acted contrary to personal or societal values
- 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

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approaches can be helpful to address thinking errors, particularly around what someone actually knew or could do at the time of the death to support more accurate appraisals of responsibility
- Exploration of hindsight bias and weatherman analogy
- May be helpful to bring in language of regret



Addressing Exaggerated Perception of Personal Responsibility or Wrongdoing

- Narrative approaches can also be helpful – bring in poems that speak to guilt or encourage them to find poems about guilt

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



Forgiveness

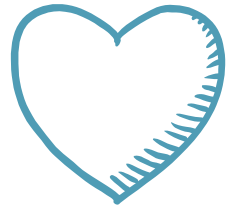
- With true guilt, finding a path to self-forgiveness can be important
- Forgiveness is tricky when we have lost someone – we can't make it right with the person directly
- Finding other ways to make amends may be helpful for addressing the corrective element of guilt
- Letter writing to past self or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



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>



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Questions?

Thank you!

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