

"It just seemed easier not to allow myself to be hurt or remember. I had too many things to do after my husband died. I had too many responsibilities. I thought it would just be better to bury the pain, but it only came back."

Using Guilt Constructively

Many caregivers experience feelings of guilt. Guilt, like fear, often does not follow the rules of logic. Guilt feelings that are ignored can add to stress and may become debilitating and undermine self-confidence.

Guilt is caused by the way you evaluate your reaction to an event. As with all feelings, guilt is neither good nor bad. How you respond to your guilt feelings is important. Guilt often makes caregivers feel responsible for the care receivers. It can pressure caregivers to be persons they are not. However, caregivers can benefit from feelings of guilt if a needed change occurs.

Cases of Guilt

- A desire to do more for the care receiver. Caregivers have a tendency to want to fix everything they can for the care receiver.
- Unrealistic expectations. Care receivers and other family members may have unrealistic expectations for themselves and others.

- Past events. Caregivers sometimes regret what they have or have not done in the past.
- Thinking "if only." Caregivers can feel guilty for being unable to prevent the need for care.
- Strained relationships. There may be unresolved issues in relationships with the care receiver and/or other family members.
- Feelings that are considered negative. Resentment, fatigue, and wishing the situation were different often cause guilty feelings.
- In some cultures or ethnic groups, complete devotion to kin and intense reverence for elderly relatives are expected.

Lessen the Effects of Guilt

- Decide whether your guilt feelings are based on something real or on something that you perceive as being real.
- When others say things that cause guilt feelings, try to look past the hurt for the truth.
- Recognize that you are doing your best with the skills and knowledge that you have.
- Look at your mistakes as opportunities to learn. Making mistakes is a part of being human. It is often the way we learn.

Make Necessary Changes

- Try to understand why things happened as they did.
- Although guilt feelings are often based on a false perception, sometimes we feel guilty because of a mistake that we made. For example, we may have become impatient and said things we did not mean. If that is the case, look at the situation closely. Does this happen repeatedly? If so, look for ways to change the situation.

Forgive

- Apologize when it is necessary.
- Forgive yourself for making a mistake.
- Say nice things to yourself. Often we do not include forgiveness and kindness in the ongoing dialogue we carry on with ourselves.

My guilt is often caused by:

I will take these steps to lessen my guilty feelings:

For more information, read:

A Survival Guide for Family Caregivers by Jo Horne, CompCare Publications, 1991.

Keys to Survival for Caregivers by Mary K. Kouri, Barron's, 1992.

Written by:

Rachel Schwarzendruber, University of Illinois Extension Educator, Family Life (retired)

This tip sheet is part of a series:

Caregiving Relationships: For People Who Care for Adults

University of Illinois Extension, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Information in this publication is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names do not constitute an endorsement and do not imply discrimination against similar products.

Issued in furtherance of cooperative Extension Service work, Acts of May 8 and June 20, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunity in programs and employment.

Copyright © 2001 by the University of Illinois Board of Trustees.

Authors and publishers have granted permission for copies of this work or parts of this work to be reproduced, provided that (1) copies are distributed at or below the cost of reproduction; (2) the author, the publication, and the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences and the relevant division within the college are identified; and (3) proper notice of copyright is affixed to each copy.

Updated 2019