

Learning To Forgive Yourself

Accepting guilt

Guilt is often a part of anger and in order to forgive yourself, it's okay to accept that your guilt is real for you rather than trying to manage the constant internal battle of attempting to deny it or block it out. Then it becomes possible to find a way forward to release the negative feelings of self-resentment associated with it.

Be specific

Ask yourself specifically what you feel guilty for rather than carrying a generalised feeling of weightiness around it. It may help to write this down to clarify your thoughts in more detail.

Consider whether it actually is guilt

Ask yourself whether it's guilt or shame as there is a difference between the two. We all make mistakes but guilt does not make you a 'bad person' because you have done a 'bad thing'. Your intentions may have been good no matter the consequences. If you are feeling shameful, that too can be forgiven but try to identify exactly what you feel you did wrong or talk to a friend/therapist to help you if you are struggling to put it in to words.

Keep rational

Hindsight is a wonderful tool and we can learn a lot from it but also recognise that you may have had limited information available to you that led to a particular decision being made. Understanding the sequence of events that happened in a logical order can help you to come to terms with the fact that your guilt may not be rational.

Write a letter

Write a letter to your loved one explaining how you feel your actions or inactions may have contributed to their death or imagine a letter from them to you telling you how they feel about your regret and assuring you not to feel guilty about it and to stop punishing yourself – they know how much you loved them.



Complete the exercise ‘What would your friend say to you?’

This helps you to think about what a kind, compassionate friend would say to you about your guilt or what they may have already said. And if the situation were reversed, what would you say to them? Why should you treat yourself with any less compassion than you would give to a friend? We often criticize ourselves more than we ever would to another person, so try to listen objectively to the dialogue that you’ve created internally and recognise how hard you are being on yourself.

Keep a grief journal

Journaling is one of the most effective ways of self-expression – you don’t need to write for anyone else, it can be personal and private so be as honest as you can. Once you get flowing with your writing, don’t be afraid to dive right into the crux of why you are feeling this way. You might want to start a phrase with “I feel guilty because ...” Don’t judge it for now, just allow yourself to express it and observe what emerges for you.

Stop playing the same tape over and over

Think about a symbolic ritual or activity you could do to make amends with your guilt eg. taking up voluntary work with a charity or organisation that supports the same cause that led to your loved one’s death. You can’t go back in the past and change what has happened but you can change how you deal with it going forward and taking positive, purposeful action can give you focus and a sense of peace with yourself.

Decide on an end date for your guilt

This may sound a little far-out but guilt rarely disappears with time alone and we can end up carrying it for a very long time until it becomes something else, like bitterness or passive-aggressive behaviour. By giving yourself an end date, you are accepting your guilt but also making a promise that you will let go of the negative self-judgement and criticism. Even if there was something you could have done differently, ‘sitting’ in the guilt for a while can be the most honest way of recognising it, but at the same time, being kind enough to yourself to realise that you don’t need to punish yourself forever.

Practise a self-forgiveness meditation

A daily meditation can help to repeatedly hear kind, loving words which embrace the notion of self-forgiveness, to absorb the words internally and to allow forgiveness to eventually surpass your feelings of guilt. Check out Youtube to find a self-forgiveness meditation that resonates with you or of course, you can create your own along the lines of “I forgive myself for”

And as always, if you still struggling with overwhelming feelings of guilt, please do seek professional help.

