



After a sudden death, survivors are left feeling like they should not go on without their loved one—and wondering why they were allowed to survive

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SURVIVORS

Skills

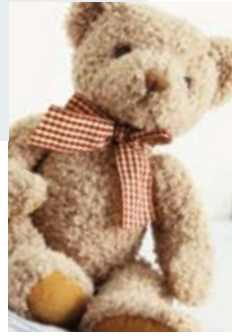
Whether a guilty pleasure or a guilty conscience, we all have experienced guilt at some point in our lives. And that can be a good thing.

No one wants to feel guilty. And it is our desire to avoid that feeling that keeps us doing the right thing.

But, according to Dr. Therese Rando, there is one type of guilt that can be one of the most difficult things a person ever has to deal with: survivor guilt. And she would know.

Among her credits, Dr. Rando is a clinical psychologist, thanatologist, traumatologist, and the founder and clinical director of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss located in Warwick, R.I. She also has written a number of leading books on death and grief, and has treated many patients with survivor guilt.

With her help, we are going to look at survivor guilt—the different types, how to recognize it and how to deal with it.



“Parental survivor guilt is when a child dies and the parent survives. This type of survivor guilt is extraordinarily strong because of the unique challenges brought about

when a child dies before his or her parents,” says Dr. Therese Rando. “It doesn’t matter if the child was a tiny baby or old enough to be a grandparent, it simply goes against the very order of nature.”

A Spectrum of Guilt

In a general sense, survivor guilt is when an individual feels he or she should not continue to go on in the wake of another’s death. It is a normal part of grieving, particularly when the death was sudden and traumatic, such as from a drunk driving crash.

“The traumatized mourner tries to figure out why this happened, what brought this on and who is responsible,” Dr. Rando says. “This leads to many questions, among them ‘Why did my loved one die and not me?’”

And therein lies the survivor’s guilt.

“A characteristic of survivor guilt is when a person feels discomfort about continuing to exist in the wake of a loved one’s death, and the questions that discomfort poses—‘Why me?’ ‘What does this mean?’ ‘Do I now have some obligation because I was spared?’ These kind of questions are common,” Dr. Rando says.

“What is not common is the degree to which it goes on. The level of discomfort and what one does with it ranges from someone who feels uncomfortable and thinks about it once in a while to the person who self-sabotages all the time.”

Those with high survivor guilt will self-punish, often abusing alcohol and drugs or acting out in ways such as having unprotected sex or affairs.

“They run risks, almost like they are attempting to get hurt or, in some cases,

almost killed again,” Dr. Rando says. “On some level, they feel they should have died and shouldn’t go on and have a good life in the absence of their loved one.”

Others simply put their lives on hold.

“Sometimes people don’t permit themselves enjoyment or they just don’t live life,” Dr. Rando explains. “I worked with a young man who had been in limbo for 10 years. He had done nothing—not moved forward at all—because his friends died in a drunk driving crash and he didn’t. He kept asking ‘How can I go on, go to college, play basketball, anything I had previously done?’ He felt that he couldn’t go on and live his life when people he loved had died.”

And where a person will fall on the spectrum of reactions depends on the individual.

“What we know in mental health is that there is a constellation of factors that influence how a person responds to things in general,” Dr. Rando says. “The same holds true for survivor guilt. Personality, background and individual physiological factors all play a role in how a person will respond. Other things that influence a person’s response are the circumstances of the death and the responses of people in their social support or family groups.”

Types of Survivor Guilt

There are three variants of survivor guilt: general, parental and with specific incident.

“General survivor guilt happens when a person you love has died for some reason. Basically, you survive a loved one,” Dr. Rando explains.

“Parental survivor guilt is when a child dies and the parent survives. This type of survivor guilt is extraordinarily strong because of the unique challenges brought about when a child dies before his or her parents,” she says. “It doesn’t matter if the child was a tiny baby or old enough to be a grandparent, it simply goes against the very order of nature.”

“Survivor guilt with specific incident happens when an individual has been in an event such as a car crash or a fire where one or more persons died and that person didn’t. They were in the same place and they could have died.”

Of these variants, drunk driving victims typically grapple with parental and

survivor guilt with specific incident and, in some cases, a combination of the two.

“In Western society, the child is extremely valued,” Dr. Rando says. “As parents, we take care of our child until he or she is able to, ultimately, take care of himself or herself. And we assume that the child will bury us.”

“If something happens and the child predeceases the parents, then parents have enormous guilt because the standard has been violated,” she explains. “Add to that the fact that there is no relationship as close biologically, psychologically and socially as the parent-child relationship, so there is always a high amount of survivor guilt. If for no other reason, the parents feel they have failed in their responsibilities to protect and provide until their child buries them. Plus, it is a massive assault on their identity, causing them to feel a loss of power and self-esteem.”

“Even if a person has never had a psychological issue in their life, when they lose a child—especially if it is sudden, violent and preventable, as it is with a drunk driving crash—this puts parents at a very, very high level of intensity in their responses,” Dr. Rando says. “And it will give them not only a great deal of traumatization, but will challenge their very ability to do what they need to do to mourn. But that doesn’t mean they can’t get through it, it simply means it is more difficult.”

Wondering Why

People suffering from survivor guilt with specific incident focus more on the questions of “Why?” and “What does this mean?”

“Because the person was in the same incident as the loved one who died, that leads to all the issues of what one did or didn’t do to survive, what one did or didn’t do to assist the other person to survive, and how come God chose me to survive and my loved one died,” Dr. Rando says of the mind set of the survivor.

“It is very common to wonder why. And from that comes many other questions such as ‘What does this mean?’ ‘Why was my life spared at the expense of the other person’s life?’ ‘Do I owe them anything because I lived?’

“It is a normal part of grieving to try to make sense out of it,” Dr. Rando adds. “Not

only is the person dealing with a major loss, but they are traumatized because of this sudden and traumatic experience.

And it is important to understand that the questions don’t have to be logical. They are simply questions that come from the mourner’s heart and head as they are struggling with why the death happened.”

When Grief Turns Serious

Guilt is a normal part of bereavement. And those mourning the death of a loved one should not be alarmed if they are experiencing it. Everyone grieves in his or her own way and own time. But recognizing when survivor guilt has shaded over into impeding the grieving process is key.

“When it starts to bring about dysfunction in one or more of the major realms of life—such as psychologically, work, relationships or your health—then it is time to seek help,” Dr. Rando says.





And it is critical to understand the difference between realistic and unrealistic guilt.

“Realistic guilt is when something you did or didn’t do affected your loved one’s survival,” Dr. Rando explains. “Unrealistic guilt is when you are feeling guilty about something when nothing you did or didn’t do had any bearing on your loved one’s survival.”

Dr. Rando offers an example. “A father gives his 9-year-old son a bicycle for his

birthday. Together they attend a biking safety course, the father always makes sure his son wears protective pads and a helmet, and the boy is only allowed to ride his bike on sidewalks. Basically, the father has done everything right to ensure his son’s safety.

“One day when the boy is out riding his bike, a drunk driver drives up on the sidewalk, striking and killing the child. The father says, ‘I killed my child.’ His reasoning is ‘My child was killed on his bicycle, and I gave him his bicycle, so I killed my child.’

“The father is experiencing unrealistic guilt,” Dr. Rando says. “There is nothing the father did or didn’t do to cause his son to be killed.”

Another important aspect of addressing survivor guilt is distinguishing between regret and guilt.

“Guilt is when you judge yourself as having done something wrong because you violated some kind of standard,” Dr. Rando says. “That’s different from regret, which is something you feel when you wish you could do something differently.”

She continues with her example. “In further talking with the father, he expresses guilt about buying his son a bike rather than the computer game his son wanted. Yet, that is not guilt; that is regret. He regrets getting the bike instead of the game. It will be important for him to recognize the difference because you can learn to live healthily with regret more easily than guilt.”

Differentiating between realistic and unrealistic guilt can be hard because they feel the same. Also, identifying regret can be hard when you are suffering from survivor guilt.

Dr. Rando says, “It may take concerned others or a professional to help point out what is realistic versus unrealistic guilt and what is really regret, and how to best live with it.”

Seeking Help

While survivor guilt is a normal part of grieving, if, after a period of time, the guilt affects you in ways that are preventing you from moving forward in your mourning in a healthy fashion, then it is time to go to someone who can help you work through it.

“People need to work this out,” Dr. Rando advises. “A counselor, clergy

person or MADD support group can all be helpful. But when guilt persists and starts causing dysfunction in one or more areas of your life, that’s when you have to worry about it.

“If you seek a counselor, it is imperative that you find someone who works with those who have suffered sudden, traumatic, violent and preventable events that end in death.”

But what does addressing survivor guilt involve?

“The whole issue of survivor guilt is how you learn to live with it constructively,” Dr. Rando says. “To do that, you need to identify what is really unrealistic guilt and let it go or work it through. You have to turn to regret what can be turned to regret. For realistic guilt, you have to admit to it and make amends, then learn to live with it in as healthy a fashion as possible. The goal is to get to where once in a while it may bother you more than other times, but, in general, you accommodate it into your life and go forward healthily.”

Dr. Rando uses survivors of drunk driving crashes to illustrate her point. “The scar of the crash will never go away. There will be times, such as the anniversary of the death, that are going to bring up a lot of feelings. But many people who have lost a loved one in a drunk driving crash find a way to learn to live with that. Of course, they would prefer that it had never happened, but they find a way to integrate the loss into their lives and go forward in a healthy way.”

And for those living under the guilt of what they did or did not do to help their loved one survive, Dr. Rando says, “You have to appreciate that in the middle of trauma, your ability to think is severely compromised. And, survival instincts are very strong—it is our innate nature to do what we can to save ourselves.

“Really try to understand as much as you can about why you did or didn’t do something and put that in the context of the situation,” she says.

“When you do that, you can eliminate as much of the unrealistic guilt as possible. For what remains, figure out what to do to atone in a healthy fashion. Some people find it difficult to forgive themselves. Perhaps it is better to look at it as finding a way to live with it in a way that is not destructive.”

Out from Under the Shadow

Survivor guilt can be an insidious shadow that haunts you. But it doesn’t have to be.

“You do not have to continue to suffer to bear witness to the tragedy or to show that you have been severely affected by it,” Dr. Rando says. This is the most important thing those suffering from survivor guilt need to know.

And while it may feel like your suffering will somehow keep the memory of your loved one alive, you don’t need to do that to yourself to prove your love.

“You can go on and have a good life. That does not dismiss the tragedy or the fact that you would do whatever you could to undo it.”

Your loved one wouldn’t want you to demonstrate the depth of your loss by condemning yourself to a lifetime of misery. Most likely, your loved one would want you to keep his or her memory alive by getting on with your life, finding joy in celebrating his or her life and learning to let go of the guilt you’re feeling.

Helping a Loved One

The support of friends and family can mean a great deal to people who are dealing with survivor guilt. Without having experienced this type of guilt yourself, it can be difficult to know the right thing to do or say.

These tips will help you help your loved one.

- Help them understand guilt is common in grief.
- Know that their questions don’t have to be logical.
- Appreciate that survivor guilt is something that has to be gradually worked through.
- Give them the opportunity to talk about their feelings.
- Allow them time to process their feelings and to put them in perspective.
- Point out self-sabotaging behavior.
- Don’t say things like “Just get over this” or “There is something wrong with you.”
- Allow them to feel good about seeking help.
- Let them know that even though they have survived and feel guilty, they are still lovable and have worth.