**Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda: Confronting Guilt and Shame During Bereavement**

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**Description**

Most prevalent among bereaved parents after a perinatal death or miscarriage, and in close relatives or friends following a suicide, profound guilt and shame arise for many during bereavement. This presentation will examine the research related to feelings of guilt and shame during bereavement, as well as strategies for helping others and ourselves persist through profound guilt and shame.

**Learning Objectives**

At the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Distinguish between guilt and shame
2. Discuss the research related to guilt and shame
3. Identify strategies for persisting through guilt and shame

**Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda**

- Imagine supporting a bereaved woman who drove her 5 year-old child to a birthday party while she was under the influence. Her daughter did not survive the trip!

- Think about the dad who did not latch the pool while he went to answer the phone. His two little boys can never again enjoy their pool toys.

- Who would have thought he would really end his life? I heard him, but I didn’t take him seriously!

**Research**

A story …
What the research says . . .

- Duncan & Cacioppo, 2015; Jie, Stroebe, Chan & Chow, 2014
- **Guilt and shame often conflated in the research**
  - Definitional issues
  - Distinct
  - Cognitive and affective components
  - Emotional issues
  - Predicts more intense grief reactions
  - PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression

Guilt and shame received very little attention in bereavement research

- Lots of unanswered questions
- Multidimensional conceptualization of guilt may be needed

- Maybe what we are really talking about is shame?

Both involve self-blame

**Guilt: Adaptive**
- Other-focused
- Tension
- Regret
- Remorse
- Assessing impact of actions on others
- Constructive engagement in relationships & reparation

**Shame: Maladaptive**
- Self-focused
- Lack of trust
- Worthlessness
- Powerlessness
- Desire to hide
- Self-evaluation
- Avoidance or projection of anger, can threaten the attachment system

Guilt and Shame: Positively correlated with . . .

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Hostility
- Low self-esteem
- Eating disorders
- Suicidality

Bereaved parents

- Prevalence of “self-blame, guilt, shame”: 42% to 51%
  - Reduced to 26% “over time”
- Higher in mothers than fathers
- Guilt “mostly adaptive”
  - Barr: adaptive in women; maladaptive in men
- Guilt significantly less for parents who bring children home for palliative care, including “over time” post-death

- Increased **guilt** associated with less caregiving at end-of-life
- Increased **guilt** associated with parents who perceived child did not receive adequate pain control
- Increased **guilt** associate with sudden child death
- Increased **shame** with suicide versus accidental death
Types of losses

- Perinatal loss
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Accident
- Unnatural death
- Sudden death after medical crisis

Determinants of Grief

Those things that will influence the intensity of guilt or shame:

- Not being able to save one's child from death
- Questioning reason for becoming ill during pregnancy
- Missing the warning signs
- Driving under the influence or speeding
- Forgetting to latch the door
- Unfinished business

Strategies to mitigate guilt

- Miles and Demi (1983)
- Rationalizing
- Religion
- Keeping busy
- Reading/writing
- Biding time
- Avoiding
- Forgiving self

Guilt versus Shame

- In guilt, fault is found with behavior without denigrating the self
- Guilt results in agitation, regret and remorse, and apologies
- Guilt is associated with mental illness
- “I did something wrong”

- In shame, the global self is considered faulty
- Shame leads to dejection, helplessness and powerlessness
- In shame, one seeks to hide or escape
- “I am worthless”

What would you?

Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way — it will always be muck.

Have I sinned, or have I not sinned — what does Heaven get out of it?

In the time I am brooding over it I could be stringing pearls for the delight of Heaven.

Activity: Let’s Get Personal

The Rebbe of Ger
Guilt and Shame

Based on the list of words we just reviewed, write down what “guilt” personally means to you.

Is “shame” different? If so, how so?

When you are done, share your response with the persons sitting near you.

Research

Brené Brown: shame/empathy researcher

video
Shame = fear of disconnection

- “Is there something about me that if other people know it or see it, that I won’t be worthy of connection?”
- “I’m not good enough”
- “I’m afraid I am not worthy of connection”
- Universal
- We all “have” it
- Starts with blame
  - Blame of others
  - Self blame

Shame: the “swampland of the soul”

Connection Continuum

“Whole Hearted” people

- COURAGE (courage to be imperfect)
- COMPASSION (to be kind to themselves first, because we cannot be compassionate to others unless we treat ourselves kindly)
- CONNECTION (because they were authentic – were willing to let go of who they thought they should be, in order to be who they were)
- EMBRACED VULNERABILITY

How do we “numb” vulnerability?

- We make the uncertain certain
  - I’m right, you’re wrong, end of discussion!
- We perfect things
- We pretend that what we do does not affect others
- We blame: a way to discharge pain and discomfort
Can’t “selectively numb”

We are the most . . .

- In debt
- Obese
- Addicted
- Medicated

. . . adult cohort in U.S. history

How do we get out of the swamp?

- Let ourselves be seen
- Love with our whole hearts
- Practice gratitude
- Lean into joy
- Believe we are enough

- Only then can we stop screaming and start listening
- Only then can we be vulnerable with people in their vulnerability

VIDEO

Four attributes of Empathy


1. To be able to see the world as others see it
2. To be non-judgmental
3. To understand another person’s feelings
4. To communicate the understanding of that person’s feelings

Activity: Let’s Get Personal

Empathy

- To be able to see the world as others see it
- To be non-judgmental
- To understand another person’s feelings
- To communicate the understanding of that person’s feelings

How can knowing the difference between empathy and sympathy help you in your work and relationships?

How do you use these four attributes in your work and in your relationships?


References


Ylitalo, N; Valdimarsdo; Ttir, U; Onelo, E; Dickman, P & Steineck, G (2008). Guilt after the loss of a husband to cancer: Is there a relation with the health care provided? Acta Oncologica, 2008; 47: 870-87