



A Dangerous Villain: Guilt

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The grief topic for today? The big G. Guilt.

Dealing with guilt is often thought of as the “dark side” of grieving. In fact, if you were to write a play about grief, guilt would be your villain.

You might be familiar with guilt--the critical inner voice that judges your actions, thoughts, and feelings. Guilt serves an important function when it helps you live by an internal moral compass. For instance, when you do something wrong, guilt helps you understand that you’ve done something wrong and helps you not do it again. So, within reason, guilt is good. It keeps you in line and prevents you from becoming a hardened criminal! But, if your feelings of guilt are excessive, it becomes counter-productive and blocks your ability to grieve. Then, guilt serves to complicate your grieving process, causing you to get “stuck” in reviewing and attempting to “fix” past events. A relentless pattern of feeling guilty can prevent you from moving forward through your grief.

Believe it or not, grief is the normal, natural and inevitable response to the experience of loss. We all grieve and it’s actually healthy to do so! Although feelings of grief can be painful, normal grief lessens over time and gradually becomes less painful. However, if this doesn’t happen, if your feelings of grief remain strong and continue to dominate your thoughts, the likely culprit is probably guilt.



Studies have shown that guilt can be justified or unjustified. If you’re dealing with justified guilt, you may be reviewing an action or decision that may have actually caused a pet’s death (e.g. a dog hit by a car while walking off leash.) However, if you’re dealing with unjustified guilt, you may believe that you are somehow responsible for causing a pet’s death via circumstances that are truly beyond your control. For instance, I once spoke with a pet parent who was convinced that her dog developed bone cancer because she insisted he sleep at the foot of the bed instead of in her bed. Whether your feelings of guilt are justified or not, it is important to remember that guilt can haunt you for a long time unless you do something about it. To continue the metaphor, if you are writing a play about grief, your hero must come face-to-face with the villain.

Ways to Deal with Guilt

There’s an old expression used by those of us who are counselors---feelings that move, change. That’s the key to guilt. In order to deal with it effectively, you have to get those feelings moving. Think of it as emotional aerobics. If you do something active and positive with your guilt, you have a much better shot at chasing that evil villain right out of town.



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Using an example of justified guilt, let's look at the man who is stuck in his grief because his dog was hit by a car while walking off leash. To deal with his guilt, he posts flyers that warn other pet parents about the dangers of walking dogs off leash. He also writes an article in the local newspaper and gives a presentation to the local elementary school. By taking direct action, he turns his feelings of nagging guilt into positive action. He learns from his mistake and uses his experience to enlighten others. This movement is an essential key to resolving feelings of guilt. Remember, your feelings must move in order to change.

Whether your guilt is justified or not, here are some ideas to make your guilt "active." There are no magic solutions here but these strategies have been proven to be helpful for working through guilt. If you are someone who is struggling with intense guilt, I encourage you to try the strategies below and to remember two important things: 1) you are human and humans aren't perfect 2) you loved your pet and guilt, not you, is the villain.

Guilt Clearing Strategies

- Write a letter telling your pet all the things that you feel guilty about and want to apologize for. Read the letter aloud or bury the letter where your pet is buried.
- Do something worthwhile in honor of your pet. Donate your time or money to benefit animals with the knowledge that you are balancing your feelings of guilt with something helpful and worthwhile.
- If your pet died accidentally, educate other pet owners about how this accident could be avoided in the future.
- Speak out loud to your pet and ask your pet for forgiveness. Most people believe that their pet would forgive them and not hold a grudge. If this is the case with you, then you must also find a way to forgive yourself.
- Do something "difficult," yet positive in honor of your pet. An example might be giving up smoking in honor of your pet. Sometimes an act of self-sacrifice may help you feel that you have atoned for your actions.
- Keep a balanced perspective. When you feel guilty about something, it's easy to forget the good parts of your experience. Make a conscious choice to remember times when you were there for your pet. Take out a sheet of paper and make two columns. On one side write down all the things that you feel guilty about. On the other side, write down all the positive things you did for your pet. I bet the positive list is a lot longer.
- Give yourself a break. At some point, you have to stop punishing yourself for things you cannot go back and change. Focus on your future actions and invest your energy in how you want to move forward. This will help you get "unstuck" in your grief process.

Like a child, your pet was dependent upon you for his or her well-being. When you love a pet, you expect yourself to be able to control every aspect of your pet's life and protect your pet from all harm. In short, you expect yourself to be perfect. But, none of us are completely perfect guardians or "parents" for the ones we love. And, none of us have the ability to completely control things like disease, accidents, and unforeseen life events.

Please be kind to yourself and be gentle with your grief. Use your guilt as a sign that you are ready to move yourself toward a more positive experience. Examine your experience and learn from it while also helping others learn a valuable lesson.

And forgive yourself. Remember, guilt is the villain. You're simply the grieving good guy.

For more information, visit the Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdompetparents.com. 