
Caregiver Guilt



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Recognize feelings of caregiver guilt.
- ◆ Explain how guilt can be both helpful and harmful.
- ◆ Address caregiver guilt using three strategies.

Recognizing Feelings of Caregiver Guilt

Guilt is a common feeling experienced by family caregivers. Some of the thoughts caregivers might have include:

- ◆ “I could have done more to prevent my loved one from getting sick”
- ◆ “I should spend more time with my loved one”
- ◆ “Sometimes I get impatient with my loved one, I shouldn’t feel that way”
- ◆ “My loved one fell at home, and it’s all my fault”

It is perfectly normal to feel guilt. Anger, resentment, and guilt are emotions that most family caregivers will experience at some point in their caregiving journey. Remind yourself that it is okay to feel this way from time-to-time.



Is Guilt Helpful or Harmful?

Guilt is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, **it can lead us to make helpful changes to the way we act.** For instance, if you get in a big argument, guilt might motivate you to apologize and repair the relationship. In these cases, you should take responsibility and forgive yourself.

Forgiving yourself is a key step in being able to move on from guilt. To do this, it is helpful to remember that you are human, and humans are not perfect. Remind yourself that everyone makes mistakes.

If guilt tries to motivate you to change a situation that can't be changed, **then it can be harmful.** If you don't address guilt, it can impact your relationships with the people around you.

Three Steps to Address Caregiver Guilt

1. Look at your situation from a different angle.

If you are experiencing caregiver guilt, it is helpful to look at your situation from different angles. Try asking yourself the following questions:

- ◆ **What are the facts?** Just because we feel guilty, doesn't mean that a situation can be changed.
- ◆ **What is realistic for your situation?** If you are trying to do too much, you may be setting yourself up to feel guilty.



- ◆ **Did I make the best decision with the information I had at that time?**
You can only make decisions based on what you know in the present. When thinking about past decisions, the best choice can seem more obvious. Remember that you couldn't have predicted the future, and be kind to yourself.
- ◆ **If my friend told me about their caregiver guilt, what would I say to them?** Often, we are kinder to our friends than we are to ourselves. You might take the opportunity to remind your friend that they are doing the best they can to juggle all the demands of life and caregiving.

2. Talk to Family and Friends

This is a very important step! Consider reaching out to family and friends for support when you are experiencing caregiver guilt to talk about how you are feeling. Social connections are important for maintaining your wellbeing. You can also talk about guilt with other caregivers at a caregiver support group.

3. Set a Realistic Goal for Caregiving

If you frequently experience caregiver guilt, you should write down your definition of what realistic caregiving looks like for you. This will help remind you of what is possible for your situation and will give you realistic goals to aim for.

When you are writing your definition, here are some things to think about:

- ◆ **What are your limits?** You may not be able to meet every caregiving demand while balancing your health, work, and life. How much time and how often can you realistically provide support?

- ◆ **What are your caregiving priorities?** Some tasks are essential, and some are nice to do. You can write down everything you do or want to do and then circle the most important ones.

- ◆ **What tasks are most important for you to do with your loved one?** It may be better for you to spend time reminiscing with your loved one, or playing checkers, and let someone else run errands or make meals. Connect with your extended support system and see if anyone is available to assist.

- ◆ **Can you care for your loved one in other ways?** If you can't provide hands-on care, perhaps you can help pay for flowers or give them a call.



QUIZ

1. Joshua had been helping care for his father at home. His father required more care as his dementia advanced and he moved into a nursing home one month ago. Joshua thinks he could have done more to keep his father at home. He feels caregiver guilt. He knows he couldn't provide the care his father needed at home, but now every time he visits his father he feels bad.

Is Joshua's guilt more helpful or harmful?

- A. Helpful
 - B. Harmful
2. Joshua decides that guilt is not helpful in this situation. To view the situation from a different angle, what helpful questions should he ask himself? (select all that apply)
 - A. "Was it realistic for me to provide more care at home?"
 - B. "Am I a bad person for not helping more?"
 - C. "If my friend felt caregiver guilt, what would I say to them?"
 - D. "What if I had made a different decision?"
 3. Joshua needs more help addressing his caregiver guilt. Who should he talk to? (select all that apply)
 - A. Family members
 - B. Friends
 - C. Other Caregivers

Answers: 1. B, 2. A, C, 3. A-C