

GRIEF AND REGRET

While it's never easy to sit with a grieving child's pain, it can be especially hard when they are struggling with feelings of guilt and regret.

When someone dies, it's almost inevitable that we'll think back over our relationship with them and find ourselves at fault for something we said, did, or didn't say or do. We might also wrestle with thoughts of responsibility for not being able to prevent or anticipate the death. When we hear similar thoughts and wonderings from children it can be especially heartbreaking.

When children come to us with their guilt and regret, our first impulse is often to dismiss or try to take away their feelings. Maybe you've heard yourself saying things like:

"Don't feel that way"

"Hush, you know that's not true."

"You couldn't have known"

"It's not your fault"

This urge to help children stop feeling guilt and regret comes from a loving place. We don't want to see them burdened with additional suffering. We might also be struggling with similar thoughts, which makes it even harder to hear them from our children.

So, what can you do to help in this situation? Start with reminding yourself that listening is one of the most caring and supportive things you can do. Creating space for children to talk about challenging emotions builds trust and demonstrates that you are able to be there for them, no matter what they are wrestling with.

Many times guilt is rooted in misinformation, especially for younger children. If they don't have the full picture of what happened, or aren't able to grasp the nuances

of such complex situations, they fill in the blanks with assumptions about how they caused something bad to happen. By asking gentle questions, you can discover if there are facts you can offer to reassure them it wasn't their fault. Here's an example:



Seven-year-old Caden knew his dad died from a heart attack. His grandmother, who raised him, explained that his dad's heart stopped working and that the doctors tried their best, but couldn't fix what was wrong. He remembered one time when his grandmother said that seeing Caden cry made her heart hurt. Caden had cried a lot in front of his dad, especially when his dad left for work trips. Now Caden couldn't stop wondering if his crying made his dad's heart stop working.

If Caden went to his grandmother with his feelings of guilt, she might ask questions to find out exactly what he felt bad about and reassure him that his tears didn't cause his dad's heart attack. She could also better explain what she means when she says, "It hurts my heart to see you upset."

Sometimes it can be useful to distinguish between guilt and regret. Guilt arises when we do or say something that goes against our understanding of right and wrong. Children might feel guilty for taking something from the person who died without asking, or not following through on a promise to clean their room. Regret is often rooted in looking back at a situation and wishing we did or said something different, especially knowing what we know now. For children, this could be wishing



they said “I love you” more or that they spent more time with the person who died.

While both guilt and regret can motivate us to act differently in the future, (I’ll always say “I love you”

before I hang up the phone), it’s

also important to help children understand the power of hindsight and that they aren’t expected to be perfect in their relationships.

Children (and adults too!) are allowed to be frustrated, disappointed, and even angry with other people.

When children talk about guilt and regret, it’s good to acknowledge their feelings first and then consider offering more information to put their worries into a bigger picture context of what it means to be human in relationships.

Here’s what that might sound like:

Child: “I feel so bad that I yelled at Daddy the day before he died. What if he thought I hated him?”

Parent: “You’re feeling bad that you yelled at Daddy. I remember that and how mad you were at him. It’s okay to feel mad at people. I used to get mad at Daddy too. Are you worried that Daddy didn’t know you loved him?”

Child: “What if he died thinking I hated him?”

Parent: “You’re wondering if he died thinking you hated him. Can I share something I do when I worry about that?”

Child: “Yeah, I guess.”

Parent: “I think about all the times I did tell Daddy how much I loved him. Do you remember that birthday card you got for him this year? The one with the dinosaurs on it?”

Child: “Yes! The big green ones!”

Parent: “Right. I remember helping you with the card and we wrote “I LOVE YOU” in all capital letters three times. Daddy told me that night how much he liked the card and how special he felt reading what you wrote to him.”

While it’s supportive to listen without trying to fix, if you hear children making the leap from guilt and regret to shame, it’s important to help them differentiate between doing something they feel bad about and being a bad person. In the midst of reflecting and acknowledging their feelings, you can remind them that wishing they had told the person who died they loved them more often doesn’t mean they are cold or incapable of being kind.

Guilt and regret are common responses in grief and while they can be difficult to acknowledge, being able to talk openly and question these feelings is extremely helpful.

Asking questions about children’s guilt and regret can help you identify where more information or clarity is needed. All of this communicates to children that you aren’t afraid of their feelings, which allows them to grow more comfortable having them and being able to share them with others.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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