



THE SCHOOL OF GRIEF COURSE

WEEK 5:

Releasing Your Burden of Guilt



Notes from The School of Course taught by
Dr. David Page through The School of Grief.

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Week 5: Release Your Burden of Guilt

“Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death.” Elisabeth Kubler Ross

The next need for grievers is to release their burden of guilt and regret. Guilt accompanies grief in nearly every loss—it certainly did in mine. Guilt is insidious, it creeps under our skin and becomes a part of us before we realize it’s happening. When linked to a bereavement, guilt is often a burden we put on ourselves rather than something that others make us feel. Regret, self-blame, and shame walk hand in hand with grief. The goal is to release the heavy burden of guilt so we can get to the pure grief, so we can fully grieve.

Message in a Bottle

I would like to start off this section on guilt in grief by sharing a letter from Nicolas Sparks’ book, *Message in a Bottle*.

“Dear Catherine,

I’m sorry I haven’t talked to you in so long. I feel I’ve been lost...no bearings, no compass. I kept crashing into things, a little crazy, I guess. I’ve never been lost before. You were my true North. I could always steer for home when you were my home. Forgive me for being so angry when you left. I still think some mistakes have been made... I’m writing to tell you that I’m on a journey toward that peace. And to tell you I’m sorry about so many things. I’m sorry I didn’t take better care of you... So you never spent a minute being cold or scared or sick. I’m sorry I didn’t try harder to find the words...to tell you what I was feeling. I’m sorry I never fixed the screen door. I fixed it now. I’m sorry I ever fought with you. I’m sorry I didn’t apologize more. I was too proud. I’m sorry I didn’t bring you more compliments...on everything you wore and every way you fixed your hair. I’m sorry I didn’t hold on to you with so much strength that even God couldn’t pull you away. All my love, Garrett”

Tortilla Soup

After someone dies, people often experience guilt. They would have done everything differently if they had known it was their last days or if they had the clarity of hindsight. Guilt comes up when I talk to people all the time, it’s so common. It’s likely you may already see this with people you work with or even with your own friends and family.

A woman’s 90-year-old mother recently died. The daughter explained that she was tormented by guilt. It turns out that the night before her mom’s death, she had given her some tortilla soup. This batch of soup had turned out to be extra spicy. (You know how unpredictable jalapenos can be :) While both she and her mom coughed and their faces turned red when they ate the soup, they were both able to laugh about the spicy soup.

The mother died the next day, not long after eating the soup. And the daughter, an intelligent and logical woman, blames her soup for her mom’s death. Clearly, spicy soup doesn’t kill people. There are millions of people who thrive while enjoying spicy food daily and well into old age. But the daughter can’t let go of her guilt.

Guilt and Shame

Guilt:

What you did

Active

Remorse, regret for actions

Discharged by amends

Shame:

Who you are

Passive

Feeling small, disgusted about oneself

Discharged by talking about

Note: Shame needs secrecy to survive

A Violation of Your Belief System

Sometimes people have guilt around what they did, sometimes it's about what they didn't do, or how they wish they had done something differently.

Throughout our lives, we constantly reevaluate our own belief system around guilt. As children we were taught, "Thou shalt not murder." And as a society, we certainly benefit from this code. People should not murder. We accept this without question. And so, when an event occurs that violates a code that we accept, it's hard to let it go. When someone is punishing themselves for giving their mother tortilla soup prior to her death, she is really punishing herself for the violation of the moral code around a murder at some level.

If I asked the daughter straight out, "Do you feel like you murdered your mom?" I doubt she would answer in the affirmative. However, the guilt sinks in part because it goes against a personal, familial, and societal belief.

Clearly, in the example of the tortilla soup, the guilt is unfounded. There are cases where guilt is appropriate (if she had purposefully poisoned the soup, for example). We are going to learn how to test these theories.

Questioning the Story

When you're working with people who are experiencing guilt after the death of a loved one, your work will be to plant seeds that make them question their confabulated story. You might say, "Really, you never told him you loved him?" You try to help them question the truthfulness of their story.

In relationships, we do our best. But we've all had days we would do over if we could. We have said things we would take back. We've made mistakes. We've neglected to tell our loved one how precious they are to us. That's the nature of life. We're all human, we're all imperfect. And, perhaps most importantly, we didn't realize it was their final day. And so we second-guess ourselves. And we nurture a story based on guilt.

We Give Ourselves Superhuman Powers

Guilt is not logical, but it can serve a purpose in our minds. We want to make sense of things. The guilt gives us a sense of power when we are feeling most vulnerable and powerless.

Our minds want to make sense of death.

It's more comfortable to feel guilty than helpless. We're trying to find control, order, and power when there is none. The truth is death is not orderly, it's not fair. What makes us think we have control over death?

We don't have control over life and death. But the stories we create around guilt are comforting on some level because they ascribe to us a power over the unpredictable and heartbreaking death of our loved one.

A few years ago, I was in my office in Westlake Village that I share with a good friend named Scott. Another friend named Shawn, a lawyer, and member of a Men's Bible Study I taught, stopped by the office to see Scott who was out at lunch. I was busy working and just greeted Shawn and relayed the fact that Scott wasn't around but was at lunch and wouldn't be back for at least an hour. The next week Shawn died of suicide by shooting himself. I felt guilty. I asked myself what would have happened if I had asked him how he was really doing that day and talked to him longer? What if I had invited him to stay and hang out. I realize now that we can't do a full mental health assessment on everyone who visits us. Yet, I beat myself up.

My daughter, Jackie, died of a malignant brain tumor. I had absolutely no control over her life or death after her diagnosis. It was the worst reality I ever had to face. Because I wanted to control the situation and because guilt isn't always logical, I began to think her condition was a result of something I had done in my past. Maybe God was punishing me for a sin from my past or present. Maybe I wasn't the husband or father I should have been? I realized later that if that was true then no parents would have kids because we all sin. Guilt can be brutal.

We Are Deeply Committed to Our Stories

People are deeply committed to their stories, especially those around guilt. We rarely ask ourselves, "What if that is not the truest story? What if I am wrong?"

I misplaced my car keys. I knew they were in the house. I checked everywhere. I looked in my pockets, the office, the kitchen. I searched the house up and down. I was certain they were there. They had to be in the house! Then I stopped and asked myself, "What if I am wrong?" What if the story we are telling ourselves isn't the true option? Sure enough, the keys were in my car. This is just a small story about missing car keys. And yet, my mind dug in and was fully committed to the story. In life and death, people are really committed to their stories. You will likely find that when people share their guilt stories with you, they don't couch it with "This might sound crazy but..." They don't question its validity at all. We must transition them from a rigid, unquestionable story to making room for another option.

The Sad Reality Is, People Die

The reality is... people die.

- Unfairly
- Randomly
- Suddenly
- After a long illness
- When we do everything right (and btw, no one does everything right)
- Children and others die young
- They die just as they were starting to get better
- When they have healthy habits
- When they had annual check-ups or just saw the cardiologist
- When they were dearly loved
- Despite our best efforts

We want to control the uncontrollable. We would always rather feel guilty than helpless. We want to go back and have a different outcome.

Occam's Razor as a Helpful Tool

In Jr. High science we learned about scientific theory. Occam's razor is a scientific idea that is important to consider when working with people in grief. "The simplest explanation is usually the best and truest one." Even if you didn't attend the birthday party, they would have died. Even if you hadn't shared that spicy soup, they would have died. The simplest solution is usually true.

What If?

When I work with people, I often have them write down a list of "What ifs":

- What if I hadn't made that spicy tortilla soup then she would still be alive
- The premise is that spicy soup kills
- That's what we test

After they write down the theory. I have them go back to the scientific theory and think about whether it's repeatable. I then have them question their theory and cross out the "What if" and replace it with "Even if." For example: Even if I had given them bland soup, they still would have died.

Bargaining

Sometimes we don't understand that when we're talking about guilt, that we're often actually talking about bargaining. Kubler-Ross' idea of bargaining is the deal-making before death. "God, I will go to church more if he lives." After death, it's the guilt and what-ifs.

Part of the premise of this is that at a certain point, someone can be so committed to the story that you're not finding a way in. They are really digging in. When that happens, sometimes it's bargaining. When someone really stays in their story and is in circular thinking, it keeps them from the pain of grief.

I ask people who are holding onto a guilt or bargaining story to drop down into the pain. “I hear you think your mom’s death was caused by the soup. But what’s it like without your mom here to ever have soup with you again?” Bargaining becomes an escape from the pain. It can be a distraction from the painful reality. In bargaining, you can find temporary relief from the pain of grief.

Bargaining can help our minds move from one state of loss to another. The use of bargaining can also fill in the gaps that our strong emotions dominate and allow us to believe that we can restore chaos to the disorder.

The way you might work with people varies with their situation. Early in grief, I just plant the seed. “I really wonder if soup kills.” That story is their mind trying to buy them some more time. It might give the griever some space and time to process the pain more slowly. Sometimes you might need to stay in circular thinking. In the beginning, guilt and bargaining can keep our minds busy and protect us from the pain.

Tears in Heaven

Guilt and regret can be devastating after losing someone you love. The song, *Tears in Heaven*, by Eric Clapton may be the saddest song ever written about losing a loved one. Dealing with the loss of his four-year-old son, Conor, who fell from the 53rd floor of a building while playing tag with the housekeeper, the song helped Clapton come to terms with this tragedy and grieve the loss of his son.

The lyrics express his sadness and hopeful encounter with his son and what it would be like to see him in heaven. Clapton loved his son and expressed his desire to be a more involved parent to his girlfriend at the time, the mother of the child, just a few days before his son’s death. You can sense the uncertainty of his relationship with his son in the following lyric: “Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?”

“Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart, have you begging please” could be an example of bargaining as Clapton realizes that time can be hard on us if we don’t get up after every fall, time can worsen our wounds.

3 Categories of Grief

I’ve observed that guilt falls into three main categories:

- **Present-day issues:** Some people felt guilty about having peace or joy in their life now. They felt guilty about the growth they have experienced.
- **Not being able to save them:** Many people express feelings of guilt over medical issues. They wish they had taken them to the doctor sooner. They wish they had performed CPR differently or earlier. They wish they made them have a checkup. They wish they had taken them to a different hospital. They wish they had been aware of the extent of their illness (physical or mental) sooner.
- **Doing things differently:** Most people have feelings of guilt around the way acted or didn’t act in their loved one’s final days. They didn’t know it was their last day/week/month. If they had, there are things they wish they could change about their relationship and interactions of the last days or weeks.

We All Have Choices

You and I have choices about the kinds of people we are going to become after our loss. We have a choice as to whether we're going to become bitter or not. Why is it so easy to become bitter when we lose someone we love?

A Woman Named Naomi

There is a woman in the book of Ruth named Naomi. She loses her husband and two sons and is left with her two daughters-in-law: Ruth and Orpah. When they move to a new town, she tells the people there not to call her Naomi anymore and to call her Mara instead, which means bitter in Hebrew. (Ruth 1:20).

Job's Wife

Job's faith was greatly tested. He lost everything and was covered in boils but never became bitter. His wife, on the other hand, was consumed with bitterness. At one point, she basically said to him "Why are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Why don't you just curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

Have You Chosen to Become Bitter?

Maybe you're feeling the guilt that often accompanies loss. "If only I would've done something differently." We can become racked with guilt until it eventually seeps into our mind and body, making itself a part of our identity. Usually, we aren't even aware that this is happening. But if you are, don't let it happen. Is guilt keeping your heart from healing?

Forgiveness is the Key (Accept God's Forgiveness)

There are two kinds of guilt: false and real. If you've done something wrong, repent and ask God to forgive you. Accept God's forgiveness, forgive others, and free yourself from guilt. Apologize from your heart in prayer and let all the negative thoughts go: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

No relationship is perfect. We have all made mistakes. There are things you wanted to do with your loved one, or things you wish you didn't say. Thinking about all the things that could have

been different can overwhelm you. Paul wrote, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Forgiveness helps us release our burden of guilt. It frees us from becoming bitter and enables us to find joy in life again.

Without Christ's forgiveness, you will live with guilt and shame. The apostle Peter wrote, "At one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy" (1 Peter 2:10 GNT). What happens when you receive God's mercy? He wipes out your sins. It's as if all your sins are written on a whiteboard and He takes a giant eraser and wipes them all away.

It's called grace.

Remember What You Did Right

We all make mistakes. Healthy amounts of guilt and regret can inspire us to become better people and make us more compassionate toward others in pain. Be a light in a dark world.

Allow yourself to remember what you did right. Guilt and regret are feelings that focus on what may have gone wrong. Acknowledge those feelings but remember to look at the bigger picture. In Jackie's case, the bigger picture was that she had a great childhood, a wonderful family, many friends, a fairy tale existence, albeit was only for five years. She died a merciful death with little to no physical pain or suffering. About a thousand people came to her memorial service to show their love for her and our family.

Focus on the good memories, not the bad. Maybe we could have handled the radiation dilemma differently or maybe we should have questioned the doctors more. The bottom line is we made tremendous memories with Jackie, though short-lived. She rode on the back of my motorcycle with me in our gated community. She loved when I sang songs to her or wrestled with her. She loved to swim in a pool, the American river, or in the ocean. She loved God, church and her friends. I had the privilege of praying with her when she accepted Christ as her Savior. These are unforgettable memories I will always cherish.

Summary

This was a tough topic to work through, but I find it so important to cover. We, as Grief Educators, need to remember to have compassion when guilt takes hold of our client's grief. We can't just say "time's up"!

Guilt presents itself in different ways when we're grieving. It can often point to a primal wound that we have experienced in the past. Guilt keeps us from being able to be present in our grief. It's a way for us to have the illusion of control and reinforces long-held beliefs we may have about ourselves.

Next week, we'll look at How to Face Our Fears in grief.

We have identified 7 needs of the grieving that we will be reinforcing in this training.

- To Have Your Grief Witnessed
- To Feel Your Feelings
- To Release Your Burden of Guilt
- To Face Your Fears
- To Not Get Over It – But Grow Into to It
- To Turn Your Pain into Purpose
- To Hold onto the Hope of Heaven

Thank you for completing Week 5!

- Dave