

Grief and Guilt: Coping

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 we talk to people all of the time. It's so common. I got together with a friend recently whose 90-year-old mother had recently died. She explained to me 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 particular batch of soup had turned out to be extra spicy. While both she and her mom coughed and their faces turned red, they were both able to laugh about the spicy soup. Shortly after the soup, my friend's mother died. And my dear friend, who is intelligent and logical, blames her soup for her mom's death. Clearly, spicy soup doesn't kill people. But my friend can't let go of her 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. If something as big and outside of power can happen to someone we love what else can happen? 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 death. Even seeing that written, it looks so obvious. Of course, 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 (albeit guilty) over the unpredictable and heartbreaking death of our loved one.

Questioning Decisions

Parents have to make difficult decisions all the time. This happens with all parents. But it is especially challenging in families with addiction. Sometimes parents take the Alanon stance where they are not giving their loved one money, or they don't let them stay in the house anymore. Out of their deep love for their child, they practiced tough love. I have counseled many parents who have taken the tough love stance and their child dies. They believe if they had not given that tough love, their child would be alive. And, I have counseled parents who let their children stay, who kept giving them money, and who didn't practice tough love and the child dies. They believe if they had only given tough love their child would be alive still. Our mind always thinks that if we took the opposite stance, things would have worked out differently. They didn't die from the parents' stance, they died from the disease of addiction. Our parenting stance doesn't have the power of life and death.

What If?

When I work with people, I often have them write down a list of "What ifs." Then I ask them to cross out the "What if" and replace it with "Even if." In the case of loving our children with the disease of addiction, we second guess every decision we ever made, going back to childhood. Maybe we should try giving ourselves grace and understanding that we were doing the very best we could under the most terrifying conditions. Instead of beating ourselves up with a litany of "what-ifs" we might find space for self-forgiveness in the "even-ifs."