

Guilt and Regret in Prolonged Illness

by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD

It often is said that sudden death is hard on survivors, but easy for the person who died. That same conventional wisdom may view death after a long illness as being easier for survivors. The truth is more complex. Each death is difficult—but in its own way. Sudden deaths do leave survivors feeling shocked and vulnerable, but death after a long illness can still leave survivors feeling numbed and exhausted.

Survivors of any death still grieve. When death follows a long illness, that grief can be evident in feelings of guilt and regret that may arise from the illness experience itself.

Two issues may develop. First, during the course of a long illness, there are many questions to decide. Should we do this course of chemotherapy? Should we go for more treatments? Are we at a point that hospice care would be helpful? After the death, we may review those decisions, constantly rethinking them, asking “Did I do what was best?”

Marla wonders about such things. Her husband, George, was ill for a long time with cancer. In the end, he decided to forego a last treatment of chemotherapy. Marla questions continually whether his decision was correct. She also wonders why they were so late in summoning hospice. Once they came, he seemed to be more comfortable. Marla regrets that she did not call hospice earlier.

There is another issue, too. Caregiving is very difficult. It is difficult for family and friends. It is even tough for the person who is receiving care. Once independent, he or she is now faced with the humiliating position of having others assist with the most intimate tasks. In such situations, anger easily flares, tempers can be lost, and

people can say things that they later regret. And again, after the death, these memories can haunt us.

Reviewing all these events is part of the grieving process. But, we also need to acknowledge that this is “Monday Mourning Quarterbacking.” Things always look different in hindsight, removed from all the pressures that led us to act the way we did.

Acknowledging this fact is the first step in dealing with your feelings. But other things may be helpful as well. If these issues are really troubling, it is helpful to talk them over with a counselor or in a support group. Reviewing the illness and reminding ourselves of all the situations that led us to act the way we did can reassure us that faced with the same situations, with similar information and choices, we would be unlikely to act differently. Exploring our decisions and behaviors with others who understand can reassure us of the human limits to our power and patience.

If the feeling of guilt is strong there may be other ways to help. Sometimes writing to the person who died or talking to an empty chair at the cemetery can give us needed opportunities to ask, to receive, and to offer forgiveness. Our own rituals and beliefs can be paths to that forgiveness as well.

All of these actions may affirm a critical point as we struggle with grief. Under all the stress of grief, illness and caregiving, we did, after all, the best we could.

Taken from HFA's bereavement newsletter, *Journeys*, April 1997. For more information on grief, please contact HFA at 1-800-854-3402 or www.hospicefoundation.org

