

Surviving Survivor's Guilt

"Survivor's Guilt" or "survivor's syndrome" occurs when one who lives through a violent event while others do not believe it is wrong for them to have survived. Survivor's guilt is most common when all parties were involved in the same traumatic event (i.e., car accident, 9-1-1, natural disasters, epidemics, a mass shooting incident, or combat). However, another segment of the population to suffer survivor's guilt are friends and family of people who commit suicide. These people often wish they had died instead of their loved one or feel they should have been able to stop what happened.

Feelings of guilt can wreak havoc on your everyday life. The manifestation of stress, depression or panic attacks may make it very difficult to get through the day.

Coping Skills

If you are experiencing survivor's guilt, the first step to get past these feelings is analysis. Exactly what are you feeling? Are you having trouble forgiving yourself or the one(s) who died? Are you holding someone else to blame for what occurred? Do you feel like you could have done something differently to prevent the events from occurring?

Remember that while you may be able to think of things after the fact that you might have done (i.e., not gone to that event in the first place) to prevent the death of your loved one, it is not possible to go back and do it over. Monday-morning quarterbacking doesn't work any better for survivor's guilt than it does for Sunday afternoon football scores.

The first step may be just to find someone to talk with. If you were not the only survivor, maybe you can sit down and talk about what happened together. It is not uncommon to take on more responsibility for what happened than you really should. Someone who was there may be able help you see that you were not responsible.

If that doesn't help, visit with someone who offers you counsel on other matters. Maybe just talking it through with someone else can offer relief.

Once you have clarified what happened in your mind, remind yourself that you did the best you could under the circumstances. Branson, Missouri, suffered a tragedy this week when an all-terrain tourist vehicle called a "Duck" overturned in Table Rock Lake during the midst of a sudden high wind. Seventeen passengers died in that incident, including nine members of a family of eleven.

The woman who survived lost all three of her children and her husband. She was especially distraught because she lost hold of her youngest boy when the boat capsized. However, when the bodies of her family were found, all three children were in the arms of her husband. That picture helped relieve her feelings of guilt and having abandoned her son. He was with his father when he died. She did the best she could under the circumstances.

Paying Tribute

Probably the one thing that will help you overcome survivor's guilt is to honor your loved one(s) who died through some sort of tribute. Can you raise money to pay funeral expenses, college for the

children, or to prevent future events like you went through? Many victims of school shootings have begun traveling to the site of the next school shooting to give comfort to the surviving families. They share a common bond and can offer a peace no one else can. If it is a military buddy you lost, can you put together a memory book for his or her family letting them know how much their loved one meant to you?

Some counselors suggest you write a letter that you put away to the person(s) who did not survive. Tell them how you felt about them, how you feel about losing them, and anything you plan to do for their loved ones or others in their memory.

For many, seeking professional counseling can help you return to living life to the fullest. How would your friend(s) or family member(s) feel about you moping around in the darkness because they were no longer there? They would want you to carry on for them.

In Christian circles, some people pretend Jesus is with them everywhere they go. They strap him in the seatbelt next to them and consider he is walking beside them wherever they go. Perhaps using this same mental strategy could help you move forward with your life. When you get in the car, look over to the passenger seat and remember the smile and laughter that you enjoyed. When you go to the park, picture what they would be doing if they were with you. Take a picture of something they would have liked and put it in your scrapbook. By keeping them alive in your memory, your life can move forward just as it would if they were still with you.

Some new treatments the Veterans Administration is employing include writing, as we talked about before, creating collages, art therapy, and group therapy. Each one offers value to survivors in different ways.

If you are suffering survivor's guilt, visit your local VA Healthcare Center today to see what programs they offer for survivors. Then, say "hello" as your old life begins to return.