WORKSHEET 147 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Guilt and the “if only”s

Looking at my self-reproaches more fairly

AIM

Examine guilt in grief (“if only…”) by distinguishing what the person knew and could do at the time from what they know today (hindsight bias), and make room for regret without self-condemnation.

WHO IT IS FOR

Persistent guilt after a death (an undetected illness, an argument, being absent at the time of death, a loved one’s suicide).

DURATION

30 min, ideally in session

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Welcome the guilt: it is common in grief and often linked to love and a sense of responsibility.
2. For each self-reproach, explore what the person knew, could do and wanted at the time, and the other causes.
3. Distinguish guilt (I acted wrongly) from regret (I wish it had been different).
4. Look for a way to make amends or to honour, if something remains to be done.

POINTS TO WATCH

Intense guilt is a risk factor for complicated grief (Li et al., 2014). After a suicide it is very common: work on it in session, paying particular attention to suicide risk. Grief is not an illness: these worksheets offer support and must not push the person to “move on”. Watch for signs of prolonged grief (at least 6 to 12 months of intense, pervasive yearning with impairment) and for suicide risk, especially the wish to be reunited with the person.

REFERENCES

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Boelen, P. A., van den Hout, M. A. & van den Bout, J. (2006). A cognitive-behavioral conceptualization of complicated grief. Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 13(2), 109-128.

PSYCHOLOGIST’S NOTES

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WORKSHEET 147 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

Guilt and the “if only”s

Best done with your psychologist

After a loss, many people blame themselves: “if only I had noticed”, “I wasn’t there”, “our last conversation was an argument”. With what you know today, everything seems obvious. But back then you didn’t know everything you know now.

1. Write down a self-reproach.
2. Write what you really knew at that moment, and what you could do.
3. Write the other causes or people that played a part.
4. Write what you would say to a friend who blamed themselves in that way.

My self-reproach	What I knew and could do then	The other causes	What I would say to a friend

What is regret (and not guilt), and what I can do with it:

These exercises do not replace therapy. If you are in distress or having suicidal thoughts: 112 (European Union), 3114 (France) or the emergency number of the country where you live.

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