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## Hospice Grief Outreach - August

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### Guilt and Regret

When we think of “grief”, we often associate it with sadness. But grief usually involves a mixture of many different emotions: love, sadness, hurt, anger, confusion, doubt, and fear just to name a few. Often stirring around in this mix are feelings of guilt and regret as well. I once heard someone refer to guilt as a case of the “shoulds”. When someone we love has died, we can become overwhelmed by the “shoulds” – all the things in hindsight we think we should have done differently: “I should have known something was wrong”; “I should have made them go to the doctor sooner”; “I should’ve been a better friend, mother, brother, wife, son”; “I should’ve said “I love you” more often”; “I should’ve been there when they died”. The “shoulds” are a natural function of wishing the other person was still alive. They are also never-ending. Once the cycle of “shoulds” starts, it can privately torture us for a very long time.

I often wish I had a magic way to turn off the “shoulds” for people. Unfortunately, there is no cure for them. But sometimes, by understanding a little more about where feelings of guilt and regret come from, it can help us develop strategies to cope with these feelings when they arise. Consider: a “should” implies that if you had done something differently, the outcome would change or be better in some way. Repeatedly thinking thoughts like, “I should have known something was wrong” indicates a belief that if we had known, we would’ve had some control over this awful event, and could’ve perhaps avoided it altogether. As painful as guilt is, sometimes focusing on what we could have done differently seems better than acknowledging there was nothing we could have done at all. As uncomfortable as they are, the “shoulds” serve a purpose – they are often a way to feel some control when death makes it seem like the world is very unstable.

We also can never confirm whether or not our “shoulds” are correct – that if we had taken different action there would be a different result. We can’t go back and change the past. What we can do is face the “shoulds” head on. This can be a terrifying thing to do. After all, believing we should’ve done something differently can feel like admitting failure or a critical mistake. Saying our failures out loud may seem like an odd practice – in our culture we often learn to conceal our mistakes because there is a lot of pressure to be perfect at everything we do. Striving for perfection works against us in our grieving because no one – not one of us – loves perfectly. Relationships are complicated and we *all* make mistakes in relationships with those we love just by virtue of being human.

And what can we do when we've made a mistake? Say we're sorry. Of course, this becomes much more difficult when the person we feel the need to apologize to has died. But we can still express our regrets in a variety of ways. Sometimes we can say them out loud – a one-way conversation directed to the person we loved naming all the ways we fear we failed them. This probably sounds very painful. And it is. Letting the "shoulds" out can be very hard, but then again, so is holding on to them.

You may also choose to share your "shoulds" with a friend or family member to help let them out. However, it's important to be aware that others may try to talk you out of the "shoulds" in an attempt to help you feel better about things. At times this might be comforting, but we may end up feeling like the depth of our guilt and regret hasn't really been heard. As when sharing any intense emotion, it's important to choose someone who can just listen and be supportive.

Writing your loved one a letter could be another way to name feelings of guilt in the grieving process. Alternatively, just writing the "shoulds" down can be a good release of guilt and regret. Writer Maya Angelou once said, "If I had known better I would have done better, but now that I know better I can do better now." Something you may want to try at some point might be to write down a list of the "shoulds" and after each one write, "If I had known better, I would have done better and I can do better now." No matter what "should" appears on your list, add "If I had known better, I would have done better and I can do better now." Do this as many times as you need to – the "should" may not go away entirely, but the judgment and helplessness connected to the "should" might just shift enough to give you even a small degree of peace.

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