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Unearned Guilt: The Worst Kind

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What best describes your role as a care partner for a loved one with memory loss?

Are you a long distance care partner who is able to visit your loved one every few months, and you manage his affairs from a distance? Or perhaps, during your visits you are able to give the regular caregiver a break, and you are happy to contribute your time, yet you return home feeling relieved to be getting back to your own routine, thus feeling guilty for leaving?

When caring for your spouse have you noticed an increase in responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, bathing, attending appointments, doing laundry, and managing medications? Are you less patient than you once were? Do you feel trapped in your role, thinking you cannot do this much longer and feel guilty for wanting out?

Living in the same town or same home as your loved one, are you married, work fulltime, and have school-age children and still care for a loved one? With so many demands, are you not available as much as needed and you often feel so guilty that you take your stress out on them?

Or are you a paid caregiver who works 10-12 hours a day? Working so many hours, do you find yourself losing patience with your charge? Have you been leaving each day feeling terrible and guilty about these moments?

Traveling down the dementia caregiving path is an emotional experience, perhaps unlike any other. Among the many emotions associated with being a caregiver is **guilt**.



You have so much to do to care for your loved one, and yet you still see so many more tasks ahead, it is natural to feel overwhelmed by the complexity of caregiving. You are not alone in your feelings and you are not a bad person for feeling them. You are human and would like to have control over your own life. You didn't ask to be put in a situation that requires you to set your own goals aside. Yet, the situation presented itself and you stepped up to the plate.

Most certainly, as a family partner, you may not feel equipped for the caregiving job, so it is natural to feel angry. Counterintuitively, anger doesn't seem like the appropriate reaction when you know that your loved one didn't choose to be so vulnerable. Rather than find an appropriate outlet for anger, many care partners turn it into the self-punishment of feeling guilty.

Your feeling of guilt may be heightened by your unrealistic perceptions of what other caregivers you know may have accomplished, and you feel that you haven't measured up. You might think other caregivers are better at coping with stress, hands-on care, working with family, or finding resources. The truth is, it is not realistic to compare your challenges and accomplishments as a



Tips & Tools

Recognize the feeling of guilt:

Unrecognized guilt eats at your soul. Name it; look at the monster under the bed. Identify other feelings and name those, too. For example, say to yourself: "I hate to admit this to myself, but I resent that Dad's illness changed all of our lives."

Be compassionate with yourself:

Cloudy moods, like cloudy days, come and go. There's no one way a caregiver should feel. Guilt subsides when you give yourself permission to have the feeling you have.

Take action:

Meet your needs. Needs are neither bad nor good; they just are. If you need some time alone, find someone to be with your loved one.

Ask for help:

Call a friend and say, "I'm having a hard time. Do you have a few minutes just to listen?" Have a family meeting and say, "Our lives have been a lot different since Grandma got sick. I'm spending more time with her. Let's figure out together how we'll get everything done."

caregiver to others. Most likely, they're struggling just as much as you are—or more.

We tend to feel guilt when we think that we are falling short of some imagined ideal. For example, all we saw was Nancy Reagan's grace and composure as a caregiver to her husband, when President Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. But all you want to do is cry and complain. Were you inside the Reagan household, seeing what really went on as his dementia progressed? All that matters is you and yours, and how to make your difficult situation as comforting as you can.

Ironically, selfless people tend to feel proportionately more guilt. Because they work so hard aspiring to an ideal to help others, they tend to ignore the inconvenient reality that they must look after themselves all the more. They may even forget that they, too, deserve extras and shortcuts and breaks. When they finally get around to a long bath or a lunch with friends, it feels as alien as it does refreshing.

Perfection is not for us mere mortals with houses to keep, relationships to tend, jobs to do, and sanity to uphold. No caregiver anticipates every fall or prevents every bedsore. No matter how much you love the person or feel you "owe" him or her, you will all be happier if you align your standards to real life. By aiming for a more realistic bar, you will find that you can achieve your goals, and occasionally you will surprise yourself with feelings of joy, instead of constantly feeling like you have missed the mark.

Understand that you will be a more effective caregiver when you care for the caregiver first. Loved ones neither want nor expect selfless servants. As a caregiver, when you care for yourself, you increase and improve your own

caregiving abilities. Yes, guilt is part of caregiving, but this guilt can help you become the caregiver you and your loved one want you to be.

DID YOU KNOW?

Important Facts About Guilt

Guilt protects our relationships. Guilt occurs primarily in interpersonal contexts and is considered a "pro-social" emotion because it helps you maintain good relations with others.

Unresolved guilt is like having a snooze alarm in your head that won't shut off. Having an incessant snooze alarm would make it hard to concentrate, as your attention would be constantly burdened by bursts of guilty feelings.

Guilt feelings make it difficult to think straight. When guilt feelings compete for your attention with the demands of work, school, and life in general, guilt usually wins.

Guilt makes us reluctant to enjoy life. Even mild guilt can make you hesitant to embrace the joys of life.

Guilt can make you avoid the person you feel you have wronged.

Guilty feelings make you feel literally heavier and more belabored. Studies have found that feeling guilty makes people assess their weight as being significantly heavier than it actually is, and perceive of physical activities as requiring significantly more effort than people who are guilt free.