

Barrett, D.P. (1994). Grief and guilt. *Coalition News- Monthly Newsletter of the MN Coalition for Death Education and Support, Inc.* 17 (1) pp.1-2.

“Unhealthy guilt is an autoimmune disease of the soul that causes us to literally reject our own worth as human beings.”

–Joan Borysenko, *Guilt is The Teacher, Love is The Lesson*

I’ve been thinking quite a bit about unhealthy guilt lately—and, about compassion. It just seems to me that so many of us, clients/patients and health care providers alike, struggle with an inordinate amount of guilt and an equally disproportionate lack of self-compassion. And, when a major loss occurs, not infrequently, we plummet further into self-castigation, pulling the rug of self-compassion from underneath ourselves.

Therese Rando in *Grief, Dying and Death* talks about guilt reactions as being a normal and expected part of the grieving process. She suggests that because human relationships always have both positive and negative feelings involved, and because our relationships, as ourselves, are not perfect, guilt will arise in reaction to the loss of another. Guilt manifests in other ways, too, in survivor guilt, guilt for failing to protect the loved one from death, particularly for parents who have lost a child, guilt for being angry, and guilt sometimes for crying for those who may experience this as a loss of control. Rando goes on to indicate that a sense of worthlessness and self-reproach are common responses to guilt and could be forms of self punishment to expiate the guilt or possibly an angry response which is turned inward on self.

Since guilt reactions are a normal part of the grieving process, it certainly seems important to help individuals understand this by naming it and normalizing it. It seems equally important, however, to help individuals work constructively with their guilt so that they don’t become disconnected from themselves, other people, and any spiritual source which they may relate to. As Joan Borysenko emphasized in *Guilt is The Teacher, Love is The Lesson*, unhealthy guilt and shame can cause isolation at times when we most need to feel connected.

Here are a few ways that I have found to help grieving individuals (and others) who may be having difficulty with unhealthy guilt and shame.

1. I learned a technique during a Pyschosynthesis training called the inner dialogue which is used when there may be inner parts of an individual in conflict. In the case of a grieving person, there may be a part which is very critical and guilts the individual with regard to certain aspects of the loss; in this situation there would also be a part which is responding to the critical voice, perhaps by feeling shameful (and rageful, as rage often gets triggered in response to shame feelings). The idea in the inner dialogue is to suggest to the person that they visualize the critical part and then ask them if there is another part which is reacting to this criticism. Assisting them in getting a dialogue going between these two parts is the next step, followed by suggesting that they bring in a third party, perhaps an inner wisdom figure, to act as arbiter.
2. In *Compassion and Self-Hate*, Theodore Isaac Rubin gives many examples of direct and indirect self-hate. It's amazing, and disheartening, to read the many different ways we human beings have of being hateful to ourselves. Rubin describes a cognitive-behavioral technique called blocking which can be used to deal with the critical, self-hating voice. Rubin calls blocking a direct form of compassion and is very simply a commitment on the part of the person to block the critical voice, once it is discovered, by replacing it with other more loving thoughts. This may sound easy, but it really can be quite challenging, as many of us who have tried it know! Successfully standing up to the inner critic often requires a great deal of effort and commitment.
3. Inner child work is an additional way I have found to help grieving individuals work with unhealthy guilt and shame. Joan Borysenko talks about unhealthy guilt, shame, and the inner child in *Guilt is The Teach, Love is The Lesson*. Inner child work is especially important for individuals who have grown up in a problematic family situation in which shame flourishes and becomes the core identity of the individual. The grieving process can become more complicated for these individuals, exacerbating the already existing tendency to fall into self-deprecation. Borysenko suggests that inner child work is a way of helping uncover and heal shame, a way of eliciting a compassionate response from our adult selves toward an inner child who probably is especially sad and scared in the face of a loss, as well as a way of allowing old ungrieved losses to surface and be healed. There are a number of good books out on inner child work. One which I particularly like is Lucia Capacchione's *Recovery of Your Inner Child* because of its emphasis on creative expression in the healing process.

Both Rubin and Borysenko believe that combating unhealthy guilt and self-hate require almost heroic efforts for many of us. I have found this to be true. I have also found it to be true that it's worth the effort, and that we owe it to ourselves and to those with whom we share our professional and personal lives, to work together to find a compassionate way of living.