

Caregiver's Corner

Guilt: Dealing with the Monkey on Your Back

by Zanda Hilger, LPC, Family Caregiver Education, Support Groups and Counseling, on behalf of Area Agency on Aging.

Guilt is one of the most common emotions that caregivers experience. At one time or another it may feel like a constant companion like the proverbial “monkey on your back.” Guilt can trigger a constant internal dialogue, making you question what you should and should not do; questioning every step you take in your caregiving journey.

Guilt presents itself in different ways. Below are comments that might emerge from guilt from caregivers in caregiver education sessions, support groups, and individual counseling provided by the Area Agencies on Aging:

- *“Have I done enough?”*
- *“Have I done the right thing?”*
- *“I resent my (brother) (sister) (spouse) (other family) because they don't help, don't offer or use some excuse about why they can't help.”*
- *“I am just so tired. And then I feel guilty that I am not strong enough to handle everything and stay positive.”*
- *“I feel guilty because I dread the future and next thing that will happen.”*
- *“I resent (the care receiver, parent or spouse) because his health problems are results of choices he's made (e.g., to smoke, eat too much).”*
- *“I feel trapped.”*
- *“What about MY life and my needs?”*
- *“My mother wants me to spend more time with her at the assisted living. But I have a job and husband. I always feel guilty, although living there is the best thing for her.”*
- *“Sometimes the frustrations resulting from all the required care sent me into a rage – then I would feel guilty.”*
- *“My mother has been sick all my life and I ALWAYS have to see about her. I am so tired of it and wish I could get away from her. I wish I could NOT go see her on Sundays and not feel guilty about it.”*
- *“He loved soup and I just never made it for him. There are always words not said and deeds not done that we feel guilty about; but there is nothing I can do about it now.”*

Denying feelings of guilt won't make them go away. In fact, ignoring the guilt or the situations that trigger the guilt may lead to depression, anxiety, angry outbursts, problems with sleep, overeating, and strained relationships with family, friends and co-workers.

Below are some useful techniques to identify and cope with guilt that you experience.

Practical ways to cope with guilt

1. Acknowledge that you feel guilty.
2. Make a list of all the things that make you feel guilty and then write down answers to the questions below. Review your list at least weekly.
 - What is causing you to feel guilty about what is on your list?
 - What control do you have over the situations that are triggering the guilt?
 - What would you advise someone else if they told you about what they felt guilty about? (*How about taking your own advice?*)
 - What are you willing to let go of that will help you feel less guilty?
3. Detach: take a mental step back, a time-out when possible, or two or three deep breaths.
4. Be willing to change how you respond and give yourself time to change.
5. See a doctor to make sure you are in the best possible health yourself.
6. Exercise to drain off anxiety and fatigue.
7. Do your best to look at the situation from the care receiver's point of view.
8. Remember to not take things personally when the care receiver takes his/her frustration and fear out on you. It is usually not about you but about the situation.
9. Adopt the phrase: "*I didn't cause it. I can't fix it. I can cope with it*"
10. Forgive yourself for feeling guilty. It is a normal human emotion.

A Metroplex former caregiver, social worker and advocate summed up the guilt of caregiving when she said, "*In caregiving, things do happen and our responses are normal, to be expected. It's just part of life and some things we simply must accept and live with and forgive ourselves.*"

For current information on support groups and caregiver education, go to www.familycaregiversonline.com/schedule.asp for a schedule of sessions.

Remember that individual caregiver counseling may also be available through the local Area Agency on Aging.

Caregiver education and support groups can be set up in your community, library, church, or company at no cost. Contact Zanda Hilger at 817 581-5890, call 2-1-1, your local Area Agency on Aging, or local Aging & Disability Resource Center (ADRC).