

# Feeling Guilty After Suicide

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When something goes terribly wrong, human beings have a natural and powerful need to make sense of what has happened. This usually includes a need to affix blame for the bad thing that has happened. Most people, even if they are outwardly blaming someone else for the suicide, will also be privately asking themselves. “Is this my fault? Why didn’t I see this coming? Could I have done more to prevent it?”

This self-blaming is very, very common after a suicide. Later on in this book, we will discuss some reasons why people tend to blame themselves so much for a suicide. Guilt is a very strong emotion – it is usually a sign of the sense of responsibility and love that you feel for your loved one. Here are some different types of guilt feelings that you may find yourself experiencing. See if any of the following relate to you.

## Types of Guilt Feelings

**Death-causation Guilt:** You feel that you did something or failed to do something that led to the suicide.

**Role Guilt:** You blame yourself for not being a good enough parent/sibling/spouse/friend/child for your loved one.

**“If-Only” Guilt:** You say to yourself over and over, “If only I would have \_\_\_\_\_.” Or “Why didn’t I \_\_\_\_\_?”

**Moral Guilt:** You believe that you did something wrong months or years ago, and you feel that this tragedy is somehow related to your wrongdoing.

**Survival Guilt:** You don’t feel entitled to any happiness in your life. You feel guilty just for being alive, when your loved one suffered and died.

**Grief Guilt:** You feel that you are not grieving correctly.

**Unmentionable Guilt—**You feel guilty for reasons that you believe are too terrible to tell, or even let yourself think about.

**“Getting Better” Guilt:** You feel guilty for feeling better, and for having your life move on without your loved one.

## No Easy Fix for Guilt

There is no simple “fix” for the guilt that you are feeling. But some facts may help you reevaluate your guilt.

First, suicide is frequently associated with the presence of a psychiatric disorder, most often depression. People suffering from a severe psychiatric disorder are usually in a great deal of emotional turmoil and pain. As with physical illness, the severity of the pain intensifies the person's wish to find relief. Almost all suicides involve the powerful wish to find relief from emotional pain.

It hurts to think of your loved one's emotional distress, but it is crucial to remember that there are limits to how much you or anyone else could have done to relieve their suffering. Just as no one can erase the grief that you feel right now, there were limits to what anyone could have done to fix your loved one's pain.

This is particularly true if your loved one became convinced that suicide was their only option for release. Perhaps it is best to think of most suicides as an extreme alternative to continuing to live in a present state of emotional pain. Suicidal behavior is almost always born of suffering, desperation, and distorted thinking that was a result of some type of psychiatric disorder. It is an act for which you ultimately cannot be responsible.

### We Couldn't Stop the Suicide

Second, there are limits to how much anyone can do to stop an act of suicide. Research from people who survived suicide attempts has shown that, while many suicidal people experience feelings of ambivalence about suicide, some do not. For some, the act may even have been quite impulsive.

And we know that some people manage to end their life, even while they are hospitalized on locked psychiatric units under careful supervision. In light of this fact, try to be realistic about how preventable the suicide was and how much you could have done to intervene.

### We Can Stop Self-Punishment

Finally, even if you somehow feel that you did something that contributed to the suicide, or that you failed to prevent it, we encourage you to work towards being compassionate towards yourself. Living through the suicide of a loved one confronts all survivors with a profound sense of their own limitations. These include the limits of our abilities to help others, to alleviate their suffering, or to predict or prevent a terrible thing from happening. They also include our own imperfections and mistakes. Both you and your loved one were, after all, just human.