SURVIVOR GUILT
SURVIVOR GUILT

When someone is killed in an impaired driving crash, the death is sudden, violent, final and beyond understanding. If your loved one was killed, it is likely that you have responded to their death in any number of ways and with a variety of thoughts and feelings. Collectively, these responses are often referred to as grief. Grief is the process of experiencing the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual effects of a death or any other loss.

Dealing with the aftermath of an impaired driving crash is a process, a healing journey. It is important to remember that no two people grieve in the same way, with the same intensity or for the same duration. However, a survivor’s prior experiences with death and trauma will affect the manner in which they experience grief.

After a traumatic event, some individuals may question why they survived when others died, whether or not they were physically present at the time of the incident. This particular grief reaction is called “survivor guilt” and is a very normal response to trauma. You may believe that you could have somehow prevented your loved one’s death. It is important for you to express your feelings, as well as to explain the circumstances surrounding the crash, so that friends and family can help you realistically evaluate any feelings of guilt or responsibility.

As you grieve, be patient and be good to yourself. Take time to feel the pain of your loss and experience your grief. Learning about your grief and survivor guilt will not change how you feel about the death of your loved one, but it may help you feel more comfortable with the process.
DIFFERENT TYPES OF SURVIVOR GUILT

In basic terms, survivor guilt occurs when an individual feels he or she should not continue to live or go on in the event of another’s death. It is a normal part of grieving, particularly when the death was sudden and traumatic, such as in the case of a death resulting from an impaired driving crash. There are different types of survivor guilt, including general, parental and survivor guilt with specific incident.

General survivor guilt refers to feelings of guilt associated with living and going on after someone else dies or is killed. It is difficult to reconcile feeling grateful to be alive while knowing that others did not share the same fate.

Further complicating general survivor guilt is the fact that some survivors struggle with unresolved conflicts with the deceased. Survivors may feel a certain loss of hope in knowing that they were unable to make amends before a loved one’s death.

Parental survivor guilt occurs when a child dies yet the parent survives. This type of survivor guilt is particularly distressing because of the unique challenges brought about when a child dies before his or her parents. It really doesn’t matter if the child was a tiny baby or old enough to be a grandparent. The unique connection between parent and child leaves a parent especially vulnerable, and however unnatural, unjust or illogical it may seem, a child may die before a parent. When the very essence of parenting is protecting and assuring life, the sudden and violent death of a child in an impaired driving crash is nothing less than devastating.

Survivor guilt with specific incident takes place when an individual survives a traumatic event, while others involved in the same traumatic event did not survive, such as with an impaired driving crash or other catastrophe. Under these circumstances, survivors were in the same place at the same time with those who died, yet experienced a different outcome, which can create all kinds of doubt and confusing feelings.
VARIOUS DEGREES OF SURVIVOR GUILT

When someone experiences survivor guilt, he or she tries to make sense out of a senseless situation. This seemingly endless search for meaning leads to many questions, among them “Why did my loved one die, but not me?” These and other questions are quite common and are characteristic of survivor guilt.

However, the degree to which feelings of guilt affect an individual is not universal. The level of discomfort, and how one copes with the guilt, range from mild emotional discomfort with occasional thoughts of guilt, to severe emotional pain with thoughts and behaviours that interfere with activities of daily living.

It is not uncommon for those who experience intense thoughts and feelings of survivor guilt to engage in unhealthy risk-taking behaviours such as abusing alcohol and drugs, while neglecting necessary activities of daily living. There are consequences to these risk-taking behaviours, such as loss of employment, divorce, separation and ongoing financial hardships.

There are different factors, such as personality type, family background and individual physiological traits, all of which play a role in how a person will cope with survivor guilt. Other things that influence a person’s coping are the circumstances of the death, and the responses of family, friends or other caring people.

WONDERING WHY

When a person is involved in a crash with a loved one who subsequently dies, the survivor is led to ask all kinds of questions. People suffering from survivor guilt with specific incident tend to focus on the questions of “Why?” and “What does this mean?” Wondering is a normal part of grieving. Not only is the person dealing with a major loss, but they are traumatized because of this sudden and violent experience.

It is also normal that many of these questions don’t seem rational or logical. They represent the emotional pain that comes with trying to make sense of a preventable situation. This rings true in the cases of impaired driving crashes. Again, wondering why is a normal part of the healing journey.
REALISTIC VERSUS UNREALISTIC GUILT

If you are living with the emotional pain associated with the traumatic death of a loved one, you may experience occasional feelings of survivor guilt. Don’t be alarmed. Each person grieves in their own way and one moment at a time. But it is important to recognize when survivor guilt gets in the way of processing grief. When survivor guilt leads to interruption of life activities, such as work, relationships and health, it is time to seek help.

Guilt is a term that refers to a perception or realization that you have done something wrong. Some feelings of guilt are realistic, while others are unrealistic. Both differ from regret, which is something you feel when you wish you could have done something differently.

Making a distinction between realistic and unrealistic guilt can be difficult because they feel the same. Also, identifying regret can be hard when you are suffering from survivor guilt. Nonetheless, it is critical to understand the difference between realistic and unrealistic guilt, so that you can confront the feelings and evaluate what role they play in your grief.

Feelings of guilt are relevant when you did or didn’t do something that ultimately affected the survival of your loved one. This is realistic guilt. Unrealistic guilt differs in that it involves the belief that there is something you could have done to change the outcome of a particular situation, although there was really nothing you could have done. It may take loved ones, friends or a professional to help you to distinguish what it is you are feeling so that you can learn how to best live with those feelings.
SEEKING HELP

While survivor guilt is a normal part of grieving for some, if after a period of time the guilt affects you in ways that are preventing you from moving forward in your mourning, it is time to seek help. If you decide to pursue counseling, it is vital that you find a professional who specializes in grief and works with people who have suffered sudden and violent trauma.

Addressing survivor guilt means learning to live with it successfully. To do that, you need to identify feelings of survivor guilt and let them go or work through them. In the event you are suffering from feelings of realistic guilt, it is important to acknowledge your responsibility and make amends, therefore learning to live with your guilt in a healthy fashion.

The scar of the crash will never go away. There will be times, such as the anniversary of the death, that are going to bring up a lot of feelings. But many people who have lost a loved one in an impaired driving crash find ways to adapt. Of course, they would prefer that their loved one did not die, but they find a way to integrate their loss and move forward.

When you are able to integrate your loss into your life, you can eliminate much of the survivor guilt you may feel. For any guilt that remains, figure out what you can do to forgive yourself, although some people may find it difficult to do so. In that case, perhaps you can look at finding a way to live with your guilt in a way that is not destructive to you or those you love.
FINDING ENCOURAGEMENT THROUGH SUPPORT GROUPS

It may be helpful to speak with others who have been through a similar experience. Being able to openly express the pain of your loss and reveal feelings of survivor guilt can be quite healing.

Support groups can be affirming for bereaved families and friends because they allow participants to feel that they are not going crazy. Support groups also help participants to recognize that other victims/survivors are experiencing and living with the same complexity of emotions.

You may not always be able to relate to people who have lost a loved one due to accidental or natural causes. It is often helpful to speak with other crash survivors because they understand the suffering that is specific and unique to victims/survivors of impaired driving.

Support groups can also provide opportunities for growth to victims/survivors who are further along in the healing process, as they can help others who are newly bereaved or who are having an especially difficult time coping. By providing and receiving support, victims/survivors help each other and see the good that comes from the pain they have experienced.

It is important to note that some victims/survivors report feeling worse after attending the first few support group sessions. This is usually because many painful emotions are brought to the surface. As difficult as this may be initially, many victims/survivors state that support groups ultimately help in the grieving process.

Your community may have a MADD support group or other support groups for victims/survivors experiencing traumatic grief, organized through hospitals, churches or various other social service agencies. Or, you may be able to make contact with other crash victims/survivors through MADD Canada. Some organizations offer online support groups for people who are either isolated or who would rather participate in a support group from the comfort of their own homes.
OUT FROM UNDER THE SHADOW

You can go on and have a good life. That does not diminish the tragedy or the fact that you would do whatever you could to turn back time. Your loved one wouldn't want you to demonstrate the depth of your loss by condemning yourself to a lifetime of misery. While it may feel like your suffering will somehow keep the memory of your loved one alive, you don't need to punish yourself to prove your love.

Most likely, your loved one would want you to keep his or her memory alive by moving forward, finding joy in celebrating his or her life and learning to let go of the guilt you're feeling.

Caring Tips for You

• Acknowledge and accept your feelings and understand that they are perfectly normal. Celebrating your own life does not in any way diminish your sorrow and grief over those who were lost. All of your feelings are an important part of the grieving process and should not be suppressed.

• Talk about how you feel with other victims/survivors. You will find that you are not the only one with these feelings, and simply knowing that will help you in your healing journey.

• Recognize the fact that while you survived the crash, others did not, and this is a total mystery. No one can answer the ultimate question “Why?” so try not to spend too much time trying to answer the unanswerable. Instead, look to find a purpose in your life and meaning in the things you can do as a result of having survived.

• Find ways to keep the memory of those who were killed alive. This can be done on a small scale by creating a memory book, or by donating to or participating in larger memorial events. It is pointless to focus any energy on “what ifs,” and unfair to apply what you now know to a moment in time when that information did not exist. Don't let feelings of guilt keep you from responding to your own needs. There is a difference between mourning losses and punishing yourself. Recognize your powerlessness over any of the negative outcomes of that day and focus instead on the things that you have control over today. Being present-focused will help you channel your energy
in the most productive way. Consider turning to spiritual resources for help in finding a framework for the events that took place and for resolving strong guilt feelings.

- If your feelings of guilt are so overwhelming that you find it difficult to care for yourself or perform necessary activities, please seek the help of a grief professional. Your family doctor or an Employee Assistance Program offered by your employer may be able to help you find the appropriate resources.
HELPING A LOVED ONE

The support of friends and family can mean a great deal to people who are dealing with survivor guilt. Without having experienced this type of guilt, it can be difficult to know the right thing to do or say. These tips will help you help your loved one.

• Help them understand guilt is common in grief.
• Know that their questions don’t have to be logical.
• Appreciate that survivor guilt is something that has to be gradually worked through.
• Give them the opportunity to talk about their feelings.
• Allow them time to process their feelings and to put them in perspective.
• Point out sabotaging behaviour.
• Don’t say things like “Just get over this,” or “There is something wrong with you.”
• Allow them to feel good about seeking help.
• Let them know that even though they have survived and feel guilty, they are still lovable and have worth.
For more information or assistance:
Visit MADD Canada's web site at www.madd.ca,
email info@madd.ca or call 1-800-665-6233, ext. 222.

Reprinted with permission from MADD (USA).
MADD Canada is proudly supported by:

MCLEISH ORLANDO
OATLEY VIGMOND
THOMSON ROGERS
PERSONAL INJURY LAWYERS