



Dealing with Survivor Guilt

Following a traumatic event that happens to other people, those who witness or those who are involved with the directly affected victims can experience a range of reactions. These can include sadness, grief, fear and compassion. In addition, they can feel a sense of relief that it is a normal reaction for survivors and those not directly affected to have thoughts such as: “I am so glad it didn’t happen here” or “I am so glad I am okay”. However, individuals often also experience “Survivor Guilt”, a feeling experienced by those who have survived a catastrophe that took the lives of many others. What is important to remember is that this guilt can occur for individuals who were directly involved in a disaster, as well as for individuals who were nowhere near the disaster zone. In addition, this experience can occur for individuals even if their connection with the deceased was a weak connection or even a negative connection.

QUESTIONS AND THOUGHTS ASSOCIATED WITH SURVIVOR GUILT

- Why did others have to die while I live?
- What could I or others have done to prevent this?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why couldn’t it have been me instead?
- How could God let this happen?
- Did they suffer during the disaster?
- Why couldn’t we all survive?
- Why am I lucky to be here when so many others are not?

SYMPTOMS OF SURVIVOR GUILT

Symptoms of Survivor Guilt are often similar to those of anxiety and depression. They may be experienced as mild or severe and can include the following:

- Nightmares
- Sleeplessness
- Loss of motivation
- Flashbacks
- Reduction in or disinterest in self care
- Increase in irritability or agitation
- Thoughts about the meaning of life or confusion about living
- Obsessing about the event / Preoccupation with the event
- Fear that there is no safety in the world

- Regrets about the quality of the relationship with the deceased
- Difficulty getting along with others or disrupted relationships
- Feeling immobilized
- Feeling numb or disconnected
- Unwillingness to discuss the event
- Feeling helpless
- Intense fear or anxiety
- Increase in use of alcohol or drugs as a way of manage difficult emotions
- Physical symptoms including headache, stomachache, racing heart, dizziness
- Feelings of wanting to hurt oneself or take one's own life

COPING WITH SURVIVOR GUILT

- Remind yourself that you are not alone with your feelings and that this is a normal reaction.
- Be patient. Know that healing from tragedy and loss takes time.
- Remember that there is no offense in surviving – everyone is happy you are okay even though others have not survived.
- Talk to others who you trust – share your feelings and get support.
- Do something to help memorialize the deceased and cherish your positive memories of them.
- Speak with your priest, pastor, rabbi or others in your religious community for support.
- Ask for and accept the help of others – don't feel like you are alone in this.
- Keep to a daily routine even though you are going through a difficult time.
- Eat healthy meals and make sure you are getting enough rest.
- Exercise regularly - even a little exercise can make a big difference in your overall mood.
- Get professional help if you are feeling like your symptoms are interfering in your daily living.

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