



The Rosemary Branch

Autumn 2014



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Grief and Guilt

Experiencing feelings of guilt is very common when grieving. We beat ourselves up over the 'should haves', drown in the 'what ifs' and 'if onlys', and grapple desperately with the unanswerable 'why?'

Some people feel guilty that they weren't able to save or prevent the death of their loved one, or that they survived when their loved one did not. Others feel guilty that they didn't say the things they needed to say, that they weren't as close as they should have been, or that they failed their loved one in some way.

It's important to understand that whilst difficult, guilt is a very normal grief response, and will be experienced by most grieving people in some shape or form.

What guilt can look like

Guilt can manifest in many ways. It can bring sadness, regret, shame,

doubt, heaviness and anxiety, as well as feelings of failure, inadequacy and unworthiness. It can also impact on our physical health.

Guilt isn't always logical, or satisfied with reasonable explanations. Often grieving people say they know their guilt isn't rational but this doesn't make the feelings go away.

We are born with a full range of emotions, and often guilt is labelled as a 'negative emotion' along with anger, sadness, shame etc. Negative emotions can coexist with positive ones, however, and it's this balance that makes the negative emotions bearable. Guilt is a perfectly healthy emotion, provided it is not being avoided, suppressed, or transferred onto those around you (e.g. blaming and shaming).

The tyranny of 'shoulds'

'I should have been there', 'I could have saved them', 'I ought to have

said something', 'I should have visited more', 'If only I'd told them I loved them'... with thoughts like these whirling uncontrollably through our heads, our guilt can easily grow and become seemingly impossible to manage.

"That we cannot change the past is a harsh and difficult reality to face" says Susan Meyerink, Bereavement Counsellor at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. "After the death of a loved one, those left behind often become consumed by the 'should haves' – the things that they can't change, but wish so desperately that they could."

The blame game

It's amazing how readily we can find a way to blame ourselves for the death of loved one – even when we weren't there e.g. 'if I had been there, this never would have happened'. Sometimes we try to expunge our feelings of guilt by

blaming others e.g. 'it was the doctor's fault' or 'they should have noticed something was wrong'. We can even go as far as to start blaming our loved one, e.g. 'they were a bad partner', 'they should have been more careful'.

In some cases, we can be partially to blame for the occurrence of someone's death, complicating guilt even further. It can help though to consider your intention. Did you intend for this to happen? Chances are the answer here is no, because people who intentionally seek to hurt/kill someone are usually unable to experience guilt in the first place.

Ultimately, placing blame, whether justified or unjustified, on others, or yourself, is not going to fix things. It won't magically dissolve the guilt, it won't make you instantly feel better and ultimately, it won't bring them back.

Relationships and 'unfinished business'

It is normal in relationships to unintentionally hurt someone. Unfortunately when that person is no longer with us, it is all too easy to go back to, and dwell on past incidents where there's been hurt, rather than remembering the good times.

Some people feel guilty following a death because they were not close to the person who died. Society expects us to grieve certain losses heavily, for example, the loss of a sibling or parent. The reality is though, that not everyone has a close relationship with their family and it's unrealistic to expect you would grieve the loss of someone you were ambivalent toward, or disliked, to the same extent you would a loved one.

It's OK to feel good

When we are consumed by our grief, it can often come as a shock when we feel happiness or laugh for the first time. It is very common for the bereaved to feel a wave of guilt when this happens: e.g. 'How can I be feeling happy when they aren't here?' "Feeling happy does not equate to forgetting," says Susan. "Try to keep in mind that happiness and sadness can coexist. It doesn't have to be an 'either/or', it can be an 'and'."

How do I make these feelings stop?

Whilst guilt isn't something we can necessarily just 'get rid of', what we can do, is acknowledge that it's OK for it to be there. Normalising these feelings, and accepting that it's OK to have

them, is perhaps the first step in starting to move towards a place where things can become bearable again.

With guilt there isn't a simple on/off switch, and like grief itself, there is no timeline for how long we will carry feelings of guilt. Below however, are some tips that may help you to manage and tolerate your guilt.

Tips for managing your guilt

- Recognise that you are human. Nobody is perfect, and we all make mistakes and have regrets.
- Normalise your guilt: The more you make your feelings of guilt 'wrong' the longer they will stay. Try to work with your guilt, rather than against it.
- Consider: If your loved one were still here – what would they say to you about how you are feeling?
- What would you say to a friend who was feeling this way? Can you say that to yourself?
- Try to remember the good memories, as well as the hard ones.
- Ask your loved one for forgiveness, either out loud, in your mind or on paper. You won't receive an answer, but the process of asking can be healing.
- Talk to a close friend, family member or a counsellor about how you are feeling. Saying things out loud and talking them through can go a long way to helping us process and work through our emotions.

Seeking help

"If your guilt is disturbing your ability to function, then it is important that you seek further help," says Susan. "Talking to friends and family, or seeking help from a counsellor or health professional can ease the burden of guilt, and help you to begin to accept and work with it. Remember, guilt is a very normal grief reaction. Don't be afraid of people judging you, because chances are, nobody is going to judge you as harshly as you are judging yourself."



For more information on grief resources and support services, please contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on (03) 9265 2100 or go to www.grief.org.au

Common Questions Around Grief and Guilt



My mother had Alzheimer's and I was her carer. While I love her deeply, I can't help but feel relieved that she's gone. Am I a terrible person?

For carers, friends and family of those with prolonged illness, disabilities or degenerative diseases, it is extremely common to feel a sense of relief when they die. This does not make you a bad person, nor does it mean you loved them any less. It is very difficult to watch a loved one suffer, and being a carer can take its toll on you both physically and emotionally. Try to be kind to yourself and don't be afraid to seek support if you need it.



Do children feel guilt?

Children often carry huge amounts of guilt following the death of a loved one, and unless prompted to express it, they will struggle to resolve it. Often children tiptoe around their parents — feeling guilty of being a burden, guilty that they didn't save their loved one, or feeling guilty for living/surviving when their loved one did not. It is important to have open and honest conversations with children and to give them opportunities to express how they are feeling.

Letter From the Director



In this edition:

- Feature article: Grief and Guilt
- ACGB Support Group: Companion Animal Loss
- Two new *Your Stories* contributions
- Featured grief resources

Welcome to the Autumn 2014 edition of *The Rosemary Branch*.

In this edition, our feature article looks at guilt and grief. Guilt was included as one of the main grief reactions as early as the 1940s and is considered an important aspect of grief, both as a normal reaction and as a feature of complicated grief.

Feelings of guilt can impact upon our physical and emotional wellbeing. Guilt is often a complex and uncomfortable feeling, so I hope that this article can go some way in helping you better understand any feelings of guilt you may encounter on your grief journey. We've also included some helpful tips and commonly asked questions in this area.

Also in this edition, we've included two new *Your Stories* contributions, information on our Companion Animal Loss Support Group, and a number of new bereavement resources that are available for purchase here at the Centre.

If you would like to add or remove yourself from this mailing list please email newsletters@grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100. If you would prefer to receive *The Rosemary Branch* via email, please remove yourself from our mailing list, then visit our website www.grief.org.au and click the Mailing List icon, to sign up.

Kind regards,

Chris Hall

Chief Executive Officer,
Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

ACGB Support Groups

Support groups are a way of bringing people together in a safe space to share common life experiences. This column looks at the range of bereavement support groups offered by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, and how you might become involved.



Companion Animal Loss Support Group

A companion animal is any animal that you have a close bond with, whether that be a pet, or a wild animal you have been taking care of. When a loved animal dies it can leave you feeling heartbroken.

Often when we are grieving the loss of a companion animal, friends and family don't understand the impact and magnitude of the loss. People who are grieving a companion animal often are met with responses such as 'it was only a dog' or 'get over it' or 'just buy another one'. This lack of compassion and understanding can make you feel even worse.

The reality is, the grief you are feeling is real and should not be written off as less important than any other kind of grief.

The Companion Animal Loss Support Group is a non-judgmental and respectful place, which gives

those grieving the loss of a loved animal, the opportunity to share their grief stories. Participants can meet others on a similar grief journey who understand. This can help to decrease feelings of isolation and allows individuals to support each other.

This support group, is an open group, run in partnership between the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and the Lort Smith Animal Hospital. The Companion Animal Loss Support Group is held once a month in North Melbourne, Victoria.



To register your interest in attending the Companion Animal Loss Support Group, or for further information about the group, (or other ACGB support groups), call 03 9265 2100 or email support@grief.org.au

“Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened.”

— Anatole France



Your Stories

Golf Croquet

By June

The article, "Grief and the Body" in the Winter 2013 issue of *The Rosemary Branch* resonated with me. I decided to write about the rarely mentioned sport of Croquet and how it supports the self-care tips of exercising, being involved in social interaction and doing activities that bring pleasure.

Throughout our marriage, and particularly during our retirement years, my husband and I did almost everything together. We ate sensibly, walked daily, attended gym at least four times a week and considered ourselves quite fit and healthy. It was a terrible shock when, without any warning, my husband died in his sleep.

Friends advised me to 'try something new', 'never refuse an invitation'. This was good advice. I needed something we had never done together, and I tried Golf Croquet, which I enjoyed from my very first game.

Golf Croquet is easy to learn and very social, particularly when playing doubles. It involves lots of gentle walking, eye-body coordination and stimulating decision-making. I enjoy playing this gentle sport and being out in the fresh air in a safe and friendly environment.

Player involvement can range from 'hit and giggle' to pennant competition and tournaments played with others of a similar ability.

There are pathways to advance to the highest level. The 2013 World Champion Association Croquet player comes from regional Victoria.

I really surprised myself taking up this sport. I have also joined U3A, which offers a multitude of activities, and three years on I have just returned to the gym. Keeping busy is the best therapy.

Learning To Say The Unsayable

By Mark Russell Dean

My language was initially raw, "My wife is dead" I repeated reliving the actuality until the reality was concrete.

As the weeks became months my words in turn reflected a growing acceptance as I would answer "My wife has died".

With time I met people who would only ever know me, never us, and quickly learnt that my statement of fact, this defining phrase, could back-fire in a cloud of anxiety or fear from those I said it to. So I edited, rephrased and amended my delivery, in the hope that this would allow conversation without such hesitation.

My language became wrapped in defensive subtlety. A sentence before placed the crash mat "Actually things are not so good..." to prepare the delivery of the emotive punch, my killer phrase. I'd follow-through with "...of course it is tough, as you can appreciate..." a parrying move deflecting a response and eliciting compassion. Finishing as I released them with "...but I am getting there".

A verbal battery that I considered necessary just let someone know what had happened, but letting us both leave emotionally intact.

Then it settled in the past tense "My wife died" – as absolute a phrase as we might ever hear. And for a long time there was nothing else to add.

Eventually the darkness passed, a springtime appeared and the seeds of a new life took hold. However the statement remained. Stuck in time. Reaching back to a place I was no longer in.

I discovered there are no successful ways to express "Yes my wife died, but I have moved on, and by the way you're lovely". I never lied, though I understand why some of us do. No divorce was claimed and my marriage always declared. Just sometimes the ending was left off. Occasionally meetings are easier with a little personal editing.

Now I say "My first wife died". The phrase delivering as much unsaid context and history as Hemingway's famous six word story "Babies shoes for sale, never worn" the space between deliberately left for the reader to imagine, should they want to.

Your Stories is online!

**Want to share your experience of grief with others?
Want to read about other people's grief journey?**

To learn more about how you can contribute, or to read other people's contributions, go to www.grief.org.au and click on *Your Stories*.

Join with the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and help transform the lives of grieving people.



The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is a not for profit organisation and relies heavily on donations for the provision of services. Donations over \$2 are tax deductible

and help support a range of support services including bereavement counselling, support groups, newsletters, events, education and training.

How to make a donation

1. Fill in this donation slip and return to ACGB via post.
2. Visit www.grief.org.au and click "Make a donation".
3. Call us on 1800 642 066.

One off donation

Here is my gift of: \$25 \$50 \$100 \$200
 Other \$ _____ (min. \$2)

My cheque / money order payable to the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is enclosed or, please debit my:

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Please send me information about including a gift in my Will to the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Thank you

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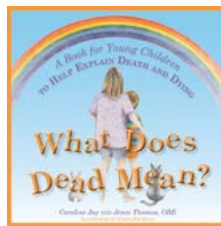
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Featured Resources

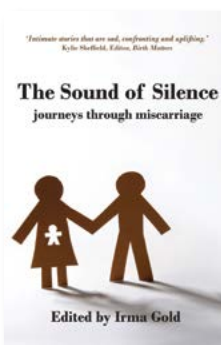


What Does Dead Mean? A Book for Young Children to Help Explain Death and Dying

Caroline Jay & Jenni Thomas

\$19.95 (incl. GST)

What Does Dead Mean? is a beautifully illustrated book that guides children gently through 17 of the 'big' questions they often ask about death and dying. Questions such as 'Is being dead like sleeping?', 'Why do people have to die?' and 'Where do dead people go?' are answered simply, truthfully and clearly to help adults explain to children what happens when someone dies. Suitable for children aged 4+, this is an ideal book for parents and carers to read with their children, as well as teachers, therapists and counsellors working with young children.

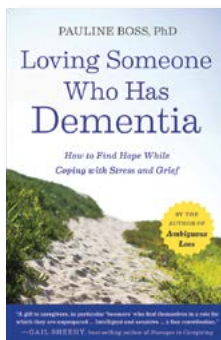


The Sound of Silence: Journeys Through Miscarriage

Irma Gold

\$22.95 (incl. GST)

Miscarriage is so common and yet within our culture it is an unspeakable subject. Women often grieve alone, mourning a child they have never met but whose future they have already imagined. It is a private, hidden kind of grief. A grief that gets gagged, buried, overlooked, dismissed, and stuffed into small corners – only to bubble up at unexpected moments. In this book, 22 women speak out about their experiences of miscarriage. These are stories of loss and loneliness, hope and joy, strength and courage, and, most of all, overwhelming love.



Loving Someone Who Has Dementia: How to Find Hope While Coping With Stress and Grief

Pauline Boss

\$22.95 (incl. GST)

Loving Someone Who Has Dementia is a new kind of caregiving book that looks at how to manage ongoing stress and grief. The book is for caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours as well as educators and professionals – anyone touched by dementia. Boss helps caregivers find hope in 'ambiguous loss' – having a loved one both here and not here, physically present but psychologically absent.

These books, along with a range of other useful resources, can be purchased from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.



Visit www.grief.org.au/resources to download a resource guide/order form, email info@grief.org.au or call 1800 642 066.

CUT ALONG THIS DOTTED LINE





Our Services

The Rosemary Branch

For all enquiries about *The Rosemary Branch*, please contact the Centre on 03 9265 2100 or email newsletters@grief.org.au to subscribe to our mailing list. To download a PDF version of current and past editions, or to receive *The Rosemary Branch* as an e-newsletter, go to www.grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) operates a statewide Specialist Bereavement Counselling and Support Service for Victoria. This program is funded by the Victorian Government Department of Health and has counsellors located across metropolitan Melbourne and in regional areas (Grampians, Gippsland, Hume, Barwon South-West, and Loddon Mallee). For further information, call 03 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Support Groups

ACGB operates a range of support groups, including groups for adults, children, bereaved partners, death of a parent and many more. For further information call 03 9265 2100, or email support@grief.org.au

Lending Library

The Lending Library is a portable collection of books about grief and loss. The books cover a wide range of topics and cater for all age groups. For more information, please contact the Centre on 03 9265 2100 or email counselling@grief.org.au

Volunteering

Would you like to contribute to the work of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement as a volunteer? Contact us on 03 9265 2100, or email info@grief.org.au

Remembrance Events

Remembrance Events are held by the Centre during the year. Information is sent to clients of the Centre who are on our mailing list prior to the event. For further information call 03 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Better Health Channel



ACGB is a content partner with the Better Health Channel. Better Health Channel provides health and medical information that is quality assured, reliable, up to date, easy to understand, regularly reviewed and locally relevant. For more information, go to www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Healthshare



Healthshare is an Australian national health initiative designed to provide better access to health expertise and improve the quality of health information online. ACGB is a content provider within Healthshare's online bereavement support community. Users can post questions or share experiences with others. ACGB staff regularly answer questions posted by the community. For more information, go to www.healthshare.com.au

We value your feedback

If you have feedback about *The Rosemary Branch*, the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Counselling and Support Service, or any of the services we deliver, we would love to hear from you. Contact us on 03 9265 2100 or email info@grief.org.au



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