

If Only - If Only - If Only

Grief often brings guilt along with it. All kinds of “if only” statements will pop up.

- If only I had made him go to the doctor,
- If only we had gone to the specialist earlier.
- If only I had been driving.
- If only I didn't let her go out that night.
- If only I had insisted on calling in a specialist 24 hours before I did.
- If only I had talked him out of having the surgery at that hospital
- If only I hadn't believed them when they said he was better and left him to go back to work.
- If only I hadn't done that, or gone there, I wouldn't be hurting like this now.
- If only I had said this, or left that unsaid, maybe things would be different.
- If only I had spent more time with my beloved.
- If only I had been more understanding.
- If only I had done this, if only I had done that.

“You did everything you could. You couldn't have saved them.”

We all want to avoid pain if we can (denial). If we can't avoid it, we at least want to learn what it was that caused the pain so we can be sure never to do that again! This is bargaining. There are always "if-onlys". One of the biggest “if-onlys” is, “If I hadn't loved him/her so much, I wouldn't be feeling so bad now!” That may be true, but if you follow that rationale to its logical conclusion, you would need to isolate yourself from everyone.

Grief can affect you psychologically. You may have feelings of fear, frustration and anger, or feel guilty and continuously blame yourself or other people. Many people can't stop thinking about the events that led up to the death while trying to see how they could have altered the outcome. You may have feelings of “if only”, if only I had done this, or had not done that.

There are certain feelings that seem to be universal to grief besides pain and sadness. One of those is guilt. It pops up in ways we may not expect. It comes with, “if only”, or “what if” or “I should have”. Guilt is irrational. You can't beat it down. You need to work through it. When we look back at our lives with the loved ones we have lost, things can become distorted. None of us are perfect and God loves us as we are. We have nothing to prove. It is always toughest to forgive ourselves. We can help ourselves by reflecting on the good times we had and good things we did. We embrace the living and move on with the truth of today and what can be.

You may feel guilty, angry with yourself. You can express your anger at your human imperfections or what you feel are the weaknesses or mistakes of others and do “if-onlys” at the same time. Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The “if onlys” cause us to find fault with ourselves and what we “think” we could have done differently. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt. Guilt is a hard stage and difficult to deal with alone. This is a normal feeling characterized by statements such as, “If only I had. . .”, “If only I had not...” done or said or thought something. Guilt may ultimately be resolved by understanding that all of us are human beings who give the best and worst of ourselves to others. What they do with what we give is their responsibility.

Before a loss, it seems you will do anything if only your loved one may be spared. “Please, God”, you bargain, “I will never be angry at my wife again if you'll just let her live.” After a loss, bargaining may take the form of

a temporary truce. "What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others? Then can I wake up and realize this has all been a bad dream?"

We become lost in a maze of "if only..." or "what if..." statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time, find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from happening... "if only", "if only", "if only".

You have enough pain. You don't solve problems with "if only". The past is over. Blaming yourself will not bring your loved one back to life. Guilt may result in depression. You may feel alone, naked, unprotected. There could be a sickening feeling of going down, down, down. You may feel overwhelmed and drained. Give yourself time, time to be hurt, to grieve, to cry, to scream, to "be crazy." Grief is a process. Your loved one has died. Death is a robber. And part of you has died.

I know the pain of these "if only" darts. There is no fruit on the "if only" tree, only despair. Be prepared to fight off these arrows with the truth. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP. Guilty feelings do not help you grieve, they delay the process. Don't get trapped into "If only I had done..." or "If only I had said...", because the only reason for asking those questions is to somehow punish yourself. I got involved in a Grief Support group when I was having trouble, and you know what I found? Everyone there had a spouse die under completely different circumstances, yet all of them blamed themselves or *felt* guilty (notice I didn't say they WERE guilty, just felt that way).

If a loved one died at work, they felt they should have been there when they died. If they were there, they felt helpless and somehow should have prevented it. If a loved one died suddenly, there was guilt for not expressing love one last time. If there was a prolonged illness, they felt guilty for thinking it was good for the suffering to be over. And on, and on, and on.

My particular guilt hurdle came about because the doctor advised me not to tell my wife she was dying, and to act like everything was normal, because the shock itself might kill her. After she died, I felt guilty that I wasn't truthful with her (we never kept any secrets from each other). Guilt....Guilt....Guilt....Guilt....Guilt.....

You know what? Sometimes people just pass on, and there's nothing that can be done about it. AND it's not your fault. Because all of us would never let our loved ones go if it were up to us. If you're tempted to feel guilty anytime, put the shoe on the other foot; would you want your loved one to feel bad or guilty if you had passed first? Of course not!

This is the primary stumbling block to a healthy grieving process. Did I do enough? Or "If only I..." Whether death came after a short or long struggle, many of us wonder if there were routes not explored, medications not taken, surgeries not performed. If we were unsure whether all options were exhausted, then residual guilt may hinder moving through grief effectively.

If you have been the deceased person's spouse or personal care giver, you will always feel guilty and chastise yourself for not doing more. This is after you did all you could do physically and emotionally. "If only" are two words that you need to avoid. For years you will catch yourself saying, "if only I had done this or that or more." It's a moot point. It is over and you did the best you could!

You can "what if" or "if only" forever, but the fact is no human is perfect and the past cannot be changed. Unfortunately, while hindsight is perfect, no human has foresight.