Survivor Guilt

Understanding and Coping with Traumatic Loss

What is Survivor Guilt?

Guilt is a common response following loss or life-threatening experience. It is a reaction that occurs as people grieve and is part of the healing process. After the death or severe injury of a friend, family, or a fellow community member, you can sometimes feel shocked, responsible for not being able to stop the event, or even feel guilty for surviving. This is a common emotional reaction often called “survivor guilt.”

Some of the common questions you may find yourself asking are:

- “Why didn’t I get hurt?”
- “Why did I survive when other people got hurt or died?”
- “What could I have done differently to prevent it?”

These questions and feelings are common, and they are part of how we grieve. It is also common to question whether you deserved to survive. Sometimes survivors may not want to talk about their feelings, fears, and pains because they do not feel like they deserve the attention or care.

How to Deal With It

Accept that guilt exists and remind yourself that these are normal responses which are part of the healing process. When people feel guilty, they tend to be by themselves. Instead, you should try to talk with people who will accept your feelings without judging you. Be aware if you are comparing yourself with others and feeling you should not have lived. Accept that it was not your time to go. Take time to mourn the loss. Notice if you are setting higher expectations for yourself to keep the guilt away. This will not change your guilty feelings and might make you feel worse inside. Find other positive ways to keep the memory alive of those who have died or suffered, for example: volunteering activities, fundraising for a memorial, or planting a tree in honor of those who are gone. The good feelings that come from helping others can be very helpful to your spirit and will help you feel less helpless.

Set up a daily exercise routine, as this will provide you with an overall sense of well-being. Remember to be grateful that you are alive and well. Learn some relaxation techniques and use them when you feel the guilt or anxiety. These include deep breathing, prayer, or meditation.

Common Signs of Survivor Guilt

- Flashbacks to the traumatic event
- Nightmares
- Depression - always feeling sad, crying, or feeling like you can’t go on with your life
- Anxiety - feeling nervous, your heart is beating fast, or you have sweaty palms
- Difficulty sleeping
- Loss of Motivation - don’t feel like doing anything
- Social isolation – not wanting to be around other people

Survivor guilt is a complex and painful emotion, but with support and self-care, you can heal and move forward.

If you have any symptoms, questions or concerns, consult with your healthcare provider. If you have a psychiatric or medical emergency, please contact 911 or seek immediate care. This is not medical advice and does not replace care provided to you by your physician. If you need additional support, you may contact Sikh Family Center at 866-732-7392. This educational information may be reproduced or distributed with attribution and without alteration or permission. Additional educational resources are available at saldef.org. The context of this video or document was developed by the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) in partnership with the Sikh Healing Collective (SHC). This project was funded through a grant from The Asian American Foundation (TAAF). Learn more at: saldef.org.