Printed September 3, 2014 from http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/coping-guilt

Coping with Guilt [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 08/2013

Key Messages:

- People living with cancer often believe they have done something wrong, either to cause the disease or during the treatment or survivorship process, leading to feelings of guilt.
- Family, friends, and caregivers of people with cancer may also experience guilt for a number of reasons.
- Finding healthy ways to share, express, and let go of guilt helps improve your wellbeing and your ability to cope with cancer.

Understanding guilt

Many people living with cancer experience guilt?a feeling of blame and regret that is usually difficult to acknowledge and express. Guilt often leads people to replay "what if" and "if only" scenarios in their minds, trying to figure out what they could have done differently or how they could ?right? a wrongdoing.

People with cancer may feel guilt at various times for different reasons. For example:

- You may wonder if you could have noticed symptoms earlier or gone to the doctor sooner.
- You may worry that you are a burden to your family or caregivers, feeling badly about your inability to perform certain tasks.
- You may feel guilty that the treatment you received did not work the way you had hoped. Remember, it is the treatment that failed, not you.
- You may feel guilty about the financial costs of cancer or the time you have to spend away from work for treatment. Consider asking for help with managing the cost of your cancer care [3].
- You may feel guilty because you survived cancer while others did not. This is often referred to as ?survivor?s guilt.?
- You may blame yourself or feel embarrassed or ashamed of lifestyle choices and habits, like smoking or sunbathing, that may have increased your risk of developing cancer. For example, some people with lung cancer worry that they will not receive as much support because they believe others will think their behavior caused the cancer. Read more about living with lung cancer [4].

Family, friends, and caregivers of people with cancer may also experience guilt during or after the cancer diagnosis and treatment process. They may feel guilty because they are healthy while someone they care about is ill or because they are not able to help more or make the person with cancer healthier. Friends and family can also feel guilty for feeling stressed or sad.

Letting go of guilt

It is important to remember that although feelings of guilt are common, it is not healthy to dwell on them. Letting go of guilt can help improve your wellbeing and your ability to cope with cancer. To reduce the intensity and frequency of guilty feelings, try to:

Remember that cancer is not your fault?or anyone else?s. It is important to recognize that experts do not fully understand why most types of cancer develop. For those types of cancer where specific lifestyle choices are risk factors, such as with cigarette smoking and lung cancer, feelings of guilt are particularly difficult and complex. However, it is important to let go of any mistakes you think you may have made in the past, and be forgiving of yourself and others.

Know that your feelings of guilt will come and go. Just like all difficult emotions triggered by a diagnosis of cancer, your feelings of guilt will change over time.

Share your feelings. Talk about the guilt you are feeling with someone you trust. If you can't talk openly about your feelings with a friend or family member, try talking with a counselor or social worker. Learn more about the benefits of counseling [5] and how an oncology social worker can help. [6]

Join a support group. For many people, it helps to know that there are others in a similar situation with similar feelings. It is powerful to know that you are not alone. Many people have been in your situation and have experienced similar feelings of guilt. Support groups may be especially helpful for people with lung cancer to discuss how to handle the lack of understanding of the people around them. Learn more about support groups [7] and how to find one that is right for you. Additional support resources are available on the Internet. Read about online communities for support [8].

Focus on positive things in your life for which you are thankful. Find activities that are soothing or help you relax. Make it a point to do things that you enjoy, such as seeing a friend or watching a funny movie. Read more about coping with cancer through humor [9].

Find other healthy ways to express your emotions. Consider expressing how you feel through creative activities you enjoy, such as music or art. Or write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal. Learn more about finding comfort through journaling [10].

More Information

Emotional and Physical Matters [11]

Relationships and Cancer [12]

Coping With Anger [13] [14]

Coping With Uncertainty [15]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/coping-guilt
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/19158
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
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