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# Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

## Forgiving Ourselves

by Pat Moriarty

**I**t would be nice if we could love someone to wellness, but we're simply not that powerful. To take responsibility for the physical care of your dying loved one does not make you guilty of their death. Yet that is how many griever's feel. "If only I had done better, this wouldn't have happened." But death happens and it will continue to happen. Loving each other won't keep death away.

Often, when someone dies, there are "leftovers" - unresolved issues with the person who died. No matter how loving, ambivalent or contentious the relationship, griever's are haunted by memories of things that were said or done, or things left unsaid and undone. Guilt is often one of the many feelings that surface for the griever.

Sometimes, people feel they should be perfect in everything. They hold their expectations so high, no one could possibly meet them. They berate themselves for failing to be 100% cheerful and competent through the illness and death. Sleep deprivation, emotional and physical exhaustion, being in a totally new situation sometimes while still in shock over the new diagnosis, - none of this counts for anything. "I should have been perfect anyway." Sometimes, guilt felt during grief is legitimate and is the result of our humanness. We make mistakes and fall short in our relationships. There are conversations and actions that we do genuinely need to be forgiven for. In his book, *The Art of Forgiving. When You Need To Forgive and*

*Don't Know How*, Lewis B. Smedes speaks of alleviating the pain of guilt through self-forgiveness. Forgiveness allows us to break through the chains of a painful and burdened past, and move with freedom to the future.

Forgiving ourselves should not come easily. It is a brutally honest process that involves looking at our own limitations with honest eyes. It is not good enough to say, "I did a poor job attending to my Dad's death." We must clearly and specifically identify those ways that we were wrong. Speak them out loud or write them down to force yourself to be specific.

Erase from your list of wrongs any items that are too minor to bother with. If death teaches us anything, it is that life is too short and too difficult to carry unnecessary burdens. We have to start letting go of the small stuff sometime

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and a process such as forgiveness should be saved for the most significant things.

You may find it helpful to write a letter to the person who died or converse aloud with the person expressing your remorse. You may feel silly, but do it anyway. Acknowledge your responsibility in specific terms. Explain

what you have learned about yourself in adding the sentence, "But I have punished myself enough." Consider creative ways of making amends if you feel this is necessary.

It is sometimes helpful to imagine a response from the deceased. One very helpful technique is to write a letter to yourself from the person you wronged. What would they say to you now? Would they hold you as accountable as you are holding yourself? Would they encourage you to stop regretting the past because you are more likely to miss opportunities that present themselves today?

Tell yourself you are forgiven and repeat it several times a day. The truth is that you did the best you could do given the resources you had at the time. It is healthy to forgive ourselves and soften the edges of our hearts so that we can truly live a healed and whole life. The hope of forgiveness is captured in this anonymous poem.

*Old Slave's Prayer*  
*Oh God, I ain't what I ought to be,*  
*And God, I ain't what I want to be,*  
*Dear God, I ain't what I'm gonna be,*  
*But thank you, God - I ain't what I used to be!*

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