

HOW CAN I HANDLE MY FEELINGS?

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“IF ONLY...”

“If only I had done...”; “If only I had said...”; “If only....” These are thoughts that torment people when someone dies. The truth is that awful things happen and often nobody can stop them.

Sometimes people are powerless, but to admit that you are powerless can be very scary. Feeling guilty is one way to avoid feeling powerless. That is why you may find yourself thinking, “If only....”

Death is scary. It makes us feel so powerless. If you feel guilty because you think you should have done something to stop your friend’s death, or that you might have done something to cause it, this may be your mind’s way of helping you not to feel so powerless. But you are not guilty. It is not fair to expect yourself to stop another person’s death.

If your friend died in an accident or from an illness, then your “if only’s” are your mind’s way of helping you feel some control in your life at a very out-of-control time. If your friend died by suicide, it was your friend’s decision, not yours. You are not responsible for that decision. You could not control your friend’s thoughts or actions any more than someone else can control yours.

“I WISH...”

“I wish I had been nicer to my friend...”; “I wish we hadn’t had that argument...”; “I wish I could take back what I said....” This is another way guilt shows its ugly face. The truth is that arguments, fights, and anger are all part of normal living and feeling. Nobody is perfect, not even the person who died. Life would be very boring if we all tiptoed around each other, afraid to disagree or to be angry because we thought another person might die soon. What went on before has nothing to do with your friend’s death.

Sometimes people are afraid to say anything bad about someone who has died. They turn the dead person into a saint. Every person in this world has strong points and weak points, even those who have died. Loving someone means being honest and accepting the whole person—both the good and the bad—even if the person is dead.

“WHY DID YOU LET IT HAPPEN?”



Red-hot anger often comes out after someone has died. You may want to blame someone for your friend's death—another person, your friend's parents, a boyfriend or girl friend, or God. You might even be angry at your friend for dying—for being careless, for getting sick, for not wearing a seat belt, for drinking, for taking his or her own life, or just for leaving you.

You have a right to be angry. It is not fair that your friend has died—not for your friend, and not for you. Go ahead and feel angry. But be careful not to turn your anger onto yourself or others. Be sure to get your anger out in a way that will not hurt anyone.

Run, work out, or go to a place where you can yell at the top of your lungs. Try to think of constructive ways to use the energy from your anger. Build something. Make something. Do whatever you can to release some of your anger. Most important, talk about it.

“HOW COULD YOU LEAVE ME?”

It is normal to feel lonely and left behind after a friend dies. The death has ripped a hole in your life. Your friend is gone, and now it seems as if you must work it out alone.

But you are not alone. Reach out to other people, including those you may not have been friendly with in the past. Try to share your pain. If they knew your friend, they may be suffering, too. By sharing your pain, you will all begin to heal.

Talk to your parents, if you can. If you can't, there are many other adults who can listen—counselors, teachers, and relatives, religious or spiritual leaders. If you know the parents of the person who died, try talking to them. They may appreciate it more than you will ever know.

Is there someone you would feel comfortable talking to? Maybe a parent. Maybe a teacher. Or maybe another person your age who also knew your friend who died.

Try to approach him or her and begin to chat about anything—the weather, sports, school, a popular movie.... Don't feel as if you have to start talking about your friend's death right away. Let the conversation come around to it. The other person may want to talk about it as much as you.

“I'M AFRAID TO GET CLOSE TO SOMEONE ELSE. WHAT IF THAT PERSON DIES, TOO?”

The pain of losing a friend can be excruciating. It makes sense to want to avoid ever feeling such pain again. But isolating yourself from other people because you're afraid of losing them will only make your pain worse by increasing your loneliness.



It is unlikely that another friend will die. Of course, there is no guarantee. But there is a guarantee that reaching out to friends can lessen your pain and help you through this difficult time.

“IF I GET CLOSE TO OTHER PEOPLE, WON’T I BETRAY MY FRIEND WHO DIED?”

Some people think that if they make new friends they are not being loyal to the friend who died. They go out of their way to avoid new friendships. This doesn’t help you, and it doesn’t help your friend who died. You can remain loyal to your friend and still reach out to others. Your friend who died will always remain in your heart and mind.

“SOME OF MY FRIENDS HAVE CHANGED. I FEEL LIKE I HAVE LOST THEM, TOO.”

People react in different ways when someone dies. Some may need to break away from painful reminders of the friend they have lost. These “reminders” might include friends they shared in common. Others may be so very sad that they just don’t seem the same. Either way, this may feel like another loss to you. As you open up and talk to people, you may find yourself making new friends and also slowly returning to your old friends.

“I FEEL LIKE I’M GOING CRAZY.”

Sometimes you may feel like you will go out of your mind thinking about what happened. The fact that death is so final is frightening not just for you but for all of us. Close your mind down for awhile if you have to. Blank-out the scary thoughts to give your mind a rest.

Sometimes it may be hard to stop thinking about your friend and what happened. Bad thoughts may come into your mind even when you’re enjoying yourself. This happens to many people. Sometimes people feel guilty about having fun. They let bad thoughts into their minds on purpose so they will not enjoy themselves.

You have a right and a responsibility to live your life and enjoy it. You cannot help your friend by holding yourself back from living your life to the fullest.

If you feel overwhelmed, take a break. Think of a way to escape from your thoughts and feelings. Call a friend, go for a walk, watch a movie, and take deep breaths. What works for you?

“ALL OF A SUDDEN IT HITS ME AND I GET SAD.”

Sometimes you may find that certain situations—hearing a certain song on the radio, being in a certain place, a change in the weather, words, a smell—remind you of your friend. They may even remind you of when and how your friend died. You may become very sad,



anxious, even panicky. This happens to so many people who have lost someone in a sudden, shocking way that is has been given a special name: post-traumatic stress.

Post-traumatic stress can take many forms: nightmares, pictures in your mind of your friend's death, fear that someone else close to you will die, painful sadness. You can experience post-traumatic stress whenever something reminds you of when and how your friend died.

Try to notice when this happens to you. Tell yourself that it is a normal reaction. Be gentle with yourself.

You are not crazy! Millions of other people share your reaction. Knowing what it is a bout can help you deal with it.

“MY PARENTS ARE HOVERING OVER ME AND SMOTHERING ME.”

Most parents want to protect their children from hurt, and what is more hurtful than the death of a friend?

You're right about feeling that they can't and shouldn't protect you from this hurt. You want to believe that you can handle it. When your parents hover, this makes you think that you can't handle it.

You have a right to your own space if you need it. You shouldn't feel guilty about wanting your parents to back off. But tell them kindly, not harshly or hurtfully. Remember that your friend's death has scared them, too. Of course they want to hold you close; the idea that someone could lose a child has become all too real for them. They may be afraid of losing you.

Here are some things you may want to tell your parents:

- “I love you and I know you love me.”
- “I know you are worried about me because of what has happened.”
- “I need to deal with this. Please don't try to protect me.”
- “Please don't tell me how to feel.”
- “When I talk to you about my feelings, I'd appreciate it if you just listened.”
- “Sometimes I may not want to talk to you. I may want to talk to my friends instead. They are going through the same thing I'm going through. We understand each other.”
- “Sometimes I may want to talk to another adult—a teacher, counselor, or minister. This doesn't mean that I'm rejecting you—just that I want to talk to someone who isn't so close to me.”

Taken from [When a Friend Dies](#) by Marilyn E. Gootman, Ed.D.

