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Dimensions of Guilt

Let's look at guilt from five different points of view:
Emotional, Spiritual, Cognitive, Physical, and Behavioral.

Emotional Dimension

As humans, we experience a complex array of emotions. Guilt is one of them. The key feature of this dimension is that guilt is a *feeling*. Pastor Dick Gilbert said it well, "Feelings are filters. They are the stuff between the outer world and you. It is important to look at what you are feeling so that you can see a new day." [6]

Because there is no such thing as a wrong emotion, it is OK to feel anything, including guilt. People who say to you, "Don't feel guilty," are essentially saying, "Don't *feel*." Since we cannot easily stop ourselves from feeling, it follows that well-meaning friends and relatives cannot take away our guilt. It is up to us to look at it, feel it, understand it, and then see what we might do about it, which is what this book is all about. For example, in the book *The Hole in Me Since the Day You Died* [7], a bereaved mother whose two sons died in infancy, stated:

[I've been] waiting for someone to come and save me—you know, my husband, my mother, my friends, anyone. I am finally to the point where I know that I am the only one who can help myself.

Spiritual Dimension

For some people, the death of a loved one brings them closer to God or other higher power. If they believe in God, they feel reassured by their belief that their loved one is with God and that God will comfort them in their grief. For others, death is a challenge to their spiritual and religious beliefs. The questioning of why God would take our loved one away can prompt feelings of guilt, anger, and confusion. Prayers that fail to spare a life can lead to a distancing from one's spiritual beliefs. A minister whose wife died of cancer struggled with the guilt he felt over his disappointment that God did not fulfill the prayer requests of his

family and entire congregation. Another man whose wife also died of cancer said to me just after her funeral, "The priest said that we were here today to celebrate. I wanted to stand up and say, 'That's not at all why I'm here.' I guess I feel a little guilty for not believing more."

In summary, the Spiritual Dimension has four areas related to guilt:

1. Guilt over unmet expectations that spiritual beliefs would bring comfort
2. Guilt over disappointment that prayers were not answered
3. Guilt over questioning God's love
4. Guilt over lost faith.

Cognitive Dimension

This dimension involves the activities inside our head, including how we perceive the world around us. Four examples related to guilt are: **Guilt Statements, Obsessions, Schema, and Selective Perceptions.** Let's take a look.

Guilt Statements

An important way to examine guilt reactions is to list some of the statements that people make when they feel guilty. These first four statements are direct admissions of guilt, while most of the others are regrets of things done or not done; and the last few are more focused on self-punishment.

Look at the list below and note which ones apply to you:

- I feel guilty (or responsible).
- It's my fault -- I'm to blame.
- I neglected someone (or something).
- I did something wrong.
- Something is eating away at me.
- I feel dirty inside.
- If only I...
- Why didn't I...
- I should have...
- I shouldn't have...