

Kicking Family Caregiver Guilt to the Curb

Guilt seems to be an occupational hazard for many family caregivers.

While it may be impossible to prevent feelings of guilt, we can take certain steps to process and manage caregiver guilt when it does arrive at our door.

The tentacles of guilt extend into virtually every area of caregiving and the downside of caregiver guilt far outweighs any benefits. As a family caregiver, you may feel or have felt guilt for:

- Being well or healthy yourself
- Not being a 'good enough' caregiver
- Not 'good enough' can mean not patient enough, not sensitive enough, not kind or caring enough, not skilled enough, not devoted enough, not spending enough time, etc.
- Feeling resentment or burdened with the caregiving role
- Doing something for yourself or taking time for yourself
- Not liking or not loving the person you are caring for
- Wishing the caregiving would end by the person you are caring for going into hospital, or long-term care, or even dying (and if the person you were caring for has passed on you may even be experiencing caregiver survivor guilt)

What to do when feelings of caregiver guilt arrive at your door?

It has been said that guilt is a kind of moral compass to police our behaviour. It can be a mobilizing force to make changes to our behaviour and in this way guilt can serve a useful purpose.

Often, however, we can let guilt trap us into just feeling badly. This trap puts us at risk of depression and does not motivate us to make any changes. While it may be impossible to prevent feelings of guilt, we can take certain steps to process and manage caregiver guilt when it does arrive at our door:

1. **Acknowledge the feelings of guilt.** Pushing them away doesn't work. What we resist persists.
2. **Explore the context for the behaviour or action you are feeling guilty about.** What was going on at the time? Was the person you are caring for being 'difficult'? Having a bad day? Resisting your attempts to help? Were you feeling tired? Depleted? Anxious? Angry? Pulled in many directions? Looking at the context opens the door for self-compassion and self-acceptance. In truth, you were doing the best you could, given the context.

3. **Examine the feelings of guilt.** Just because you feel guilty doesn't mean it is warranted. This, bears repeating. Feeling caregiver guilt does not prove you did anything wrong. Guilt isn't always a moral compass. It can be an indicator of a pattern of self-denial, self-abuse, self-criticism and even self-destruction. These are heavy words, but they are appropriate. Think about how we often describe someone as being 'plagued' with guilt, 'wracked' with guilt, or 'paralyzed' by guilt.

Why are you experiencing caregiver guilt?

Do you have unreasonable expectations of yourself? Is there some perfectionism at play here?

Caregivers in particular seem prone to both unrealistic expectations of themselves and being over-responsible for others (including their feelings, health, wellbeing, and recovery).

You may feel guilty about taking time for yourself. Perhaps you want to go to a movie, out for coffee, to lunch with a friend, or to the gym. Family caregivers will sometimes say, *"Well, it is selfish of me to do these things because ___ is not able to' or 'it is not fair for me to go out because ___ is stuck at home."*

This is a perfect example of both self-denial (denying yourself a break) and being over-responsible.

You can support and care for someone while being sensitive to their experiences of illness, disease, or injury; however, you do not have the power to control or change their feelings about their experiences. This is not a reasonable expectation for any caregiver.

Ultimately, this is about setting boundaries. Boundaries between you and the person you are caring for. Further, if you try to protect and control someone else's feelings and experiences, they are not given the opportunity to learn to manage their own feelings and are forever dependent upon you. This level of dependence doesn't serve either one of you and is a feeding ground for all kinds of negativity.

Keep things realistic

Ask yourself, what is realistic? If you are not sure, ask your best friend or someone close to you what they think is realistic.

- Is it enough, or is it ever enough?
- Are these reasonable standards by which to judge yourself?
- Are these expectations yours or are you trying to live up to someone else's expectations of you?

Trying to please and get approval from someone else sets us up to feel inadequate as well as take on blame and over-responsibility.

Ask yourself what you would say to your best friend if they were telling you about their caregiver guilt. Treat yourself as well as you would treat your best friend. People will typically not judge others as harshly as they judge themselves.

Do you regularly put someone else's needs ahead of your own? What is it going to take to put yourself on the agenda?

What should you do with these feelings of caregiver guilt?

- IF you conclude that your caregiver guilt is warranted, simply **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AND FORGIVE YOURSELF**. You can have a healthy dose of regret and, if necessary, a plan to correct the action you have felt guilty about. You can also prevent it from happening in the future. Taking responsibility and forgiving yourself go hand-in-hand because taking responsibility without self-compassion (or considering the context) is nothing more than self-punishment/abuse.
- **LET IT GO.** The initial feelings of caregiver guilt aren't the real problem. Feelings are feelings and we all experience the range of them. The real problem is when we accept the feelings of guilt without examining the context and still holding on to them or clinging to them. And it is only us holding on to these feelings of guilt. Sometimes we believe that others are 'making us feel guilty' and so we can't let it go. It is true that people may try to make us feel guilty as a way to control us and get what they want (and this may be deliberate or it may be unconscious, without awareness). This only works, however, if we let it. Letting go of guilt is a choice/decision that you make and only you can make this decision for yourself.

Does this all sound pretty harsh and without compromise? Well, indeed it is.

Unwarranted or inappropriate guilt truly serves no one. It will also suck the life and energy out of you. Refusing to be ruled by caregiver guilt is part of taking care of you!

The caregiving journey is destined to be one of angst and suffering if you let guilt move in and stay. While you do not necessarily have to kick it all the way to the curb, caregiver guilt should at the very least be shown the door.

Adapted from: <https://elizz.com/caregiver-resources/just-for-caregivers/dealing-with-caregiver-guilt>