

## Survivor Guilt

By Jennifer Briand, Western Region

Survivor guilt is the nagging guilt we feel after someone has passed, or a group of people have died, and yet we are alive and healthy.

Survivor guilt can take many different forms. In addition to the actual feelings of guilt noted above, feelings of numbness and thoughts about the meaning of life are common. Some people have difficulty sleeping and experience recurrent nightmares. Others withdraw from friends and social situations. Anger and irritability accompanying the survivor guilt are also frequent, as are flashbacks of events related to a loved one's illness or death.

Different types of experiences can lead to survivor guilt. Due to daily-reported tragic events in the media, for example, many of us experience at least transitory feelings of guilt. Constant attention to such devastating situations can become cumulative and produce a grief response which, in turn, may affect stress levels.

The sole survivor of a family that has perished in a crisis like a natural disaster or war often reports feeling guilty that they are alive when everyone else around them has been killed.

After hearing about a loved one's life-limiting diagnosis, survivor guilt can become a part of the grief process for family and friend caregivers. In recent decades, the nature of illness has evolved. People are living longer after diagnosis. Illness can be a long, winding, crisis-filled road. The caregiver often experiences survivor guilt when learning of the diagnosis, during the illness, and after their loved one has passed.

Survivor guilt can cause the caregiver to feel responsible for situations over which they have no control. I have, for example, often heard caregivers express their feelings of guilt in several ways.

"I should have done more."

"I could have been more present and spent more time with him."

"I should have taken her to the doctor sooner."

"I feel that I caused him stress at the end."

Does any of this sound familiar? Although these thoughts are real to the person expressing them, it's important to remember that they are not what caused your loved one's illness.

It is also perfectly normal to have feelings of 'wishing it were all over'; these feelings do not reflect lack of caring but instead of being overwhelmed. Remind yourself that you did all you could, and that you were a wonderful caregiver to your loved one.

My hope is that you find your way from guilt to comfort and healing! If you are experiencing survivor guilt, it helps to express your feelings in a supportive non-judgmental environment such as a Caregiver Support Group. For more information about caregiver support groups contact Caregivers Nova Scotia at our toll free number 1.877.488.7390.

