VA Caregiver Support

Free Yourself: Don't Get "Tripped Up" with Caregiver Guilt Handout

The emotional load: Guilt is a bad feeling. It can occur for various reasons. Guilt can be a sign that you have acted against your values. You can also feel guilt when someone has expectations of you that you don't want to meet. Guild can be a heavy burden to bear.

- ✓ Guilt may be connected to past ideas about what you are "supposed" to do.
- ✓ Guilt may be connected to some standard you have set for yourself.
- ✓ Guilt may be connected to something you may think others expect.

Notice when someone is placing a guilt trip on you. For example; giving or getting "puppy dog eyes," or "the silent treatment" or pressuring you to do what they want.

- ✓ Even when someone lays a guilt trip on you, you can control how you respond.
- ✓ Call out a guilt trip to get a better balance in a relationship.
- ✓ Guilt may be connected to a sense of duty.
- ✓ Guilt may arise when you reach your caregiving limits.

Take charge, make wise decisions and avoid guilt. When you listen to your conscious and do what you know is right for you, guilt will not haunt you. Decide what you think is best for you and other's expectations will not cause you guilt. You may feel regret that you are not able to do what they want but you won't feel guilty.

Expect that the caregiving needs will change with time. The care needs often rise with time and as illness progresses. You may find that you are no longer able to manage the new care needs. It is OK to make changes in your role to fit what you can manage because of these changes.

Guilt may be positive. Guilt is useful when you make things right or change behavior.

- ✓ Guilt may be a "pro-social" feeling. Guilt can make you aware of how your behavior can affects others. Guilt can support your bonds with family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

Guilt can have a negative impact on your health.

- ✓ elevated blood pressure
- ✓ increased stress hormones
- ✓ symptoms of depression
- ✓ insomnia.

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Guilt may be a sign that you are exhausted meeting others needs and must take care of your own needs. Use guilt to alert you that you are not comfortable with your decisions. It can also alert you when you are doing something for someone else that you are not comfortable with. When you are aware of the impact on your health you can make decisions to avoid the impact on your health. Make healthy decisions for yourself. This will put you in a better position to help someone else who needs you.

Your relationship to who you care for can affect the guilt that you feel.

- ✓ If your intimate partner is ill, you may struggle with changes in the relationship. You may feel guilty that you have lost sexual desire.
- ✓ Children and siblings caring for a parent can bring about old conflicts. Competing demands and role reversal can increase risk of guilt. Old patterns might include guilt trips

Strategies for managing non-adaptive guilt and instead using those feelings to improve your situation:

- ✓ Notice and admit when you feel guilty.
- ✓ Fight any urge to pass judgement on yourself for guilty feelings.
- ✓ Use guilt to help adjust your behavior and inform your choices.
- ✓ Watch out for feeling guilt as a caregiver. Make time to care for you.
- ✓ Watch out for tension among your competing values.
- ✓ If you have done nothing wrong, lay down any defenses.
- ✓ Remember that it is not selfish to care for yourself.
- ✓ Stay aware of "shoulda…, woulda…, coulda…," type thoughts.
- ✓ Replace the word "guilt" with "regret" and express feelings of regret out loud. For example, "I regret that I have reached my limit. I need some help, now."
- ✓ Watch out for negative self-talk.
- ✓ Own your choices and say you are sorry if you need to make amends.
- ✓ Survey home help company costs. Remember you have choices!
- ✓ Ask yourself if you are taking too much control or doing too much.
- ✓ Avoid guilt. Plan for future care needs. Discuss and file legal forms.
- ✓ Seek help from social workers, other experts, family and friends.

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