

Speaker Notes

Survivor's Guilt

Page 1 – Title Slide

None

Page 2 - Objectives

None

Page 3 – Agenda

None

Page 4 – What is Survivor's Guilt?

- Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will have survivor's guilt. Those who do experience it usually do so for a period of time before learning to cope well and move on.
- Survivor's guilt is often experienced when a person has made it through some kind of traumatic event while others have not. A person may question why they survived and even blame themselves for surviving a traumatic event, as if they did something wrong.

Page 5 – When Does Survivor's Guilt Occur?

- Those who were not near the event may feel they should have been there, or they may have secondary trauma from watching and hearing about the event and/or the aftermath of the event on television.
- Survivor's guilt occurs when one is exposed to a traumatic event through media or from talking to those who were there. The person can begin to experience similar grief and even guilt that they weren't there and couldn't have helped more.

Page 6 – Symptoms of Survivor's Guilt

- Intrusive thoughts: Even when a person is trying not to think about the event, the thoughts are still there.
- Nightmares: The event can continue to recur during sleep as the subconscious continues to process the events.
- Sleep disturbance can occur due to nightmares and waking repeatedly during the night or because intrusive thoughts and anxiety make it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep.
- Change in appetite: When people are under stress, their appetite can be affected, and they may eat more than usual or less than usual.
- Loss of motivation: The person has no desire or limited desire to do anything constructive.
- Feeling immobilized: Feeling they can't take action and move forward.

Page 7 – Symptoms of Survivor's Guilt (Continued)

- Obsessing about the event: Continuing to constantly think about the event and what they could or couldn't have done.
- Withdrawal from friends and family: Some people withdraw from everyone in an attempt to avoid talking about the event.

- Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem: When there is guilt about what a person could have done differently, there can be feelings of inadequacy that lead to a decrease in self-esteem and confidence.
- Some people feel guilt for experiencing the symptoms of survivor's guilt; they may feel it is a sign of weakness and/or disrespectful of those who died or were injured.

Page 8 – Understanding the Effects of Guilt

- Intensify trauma and grief: Feeling guilty about what you might or might not have done can magnify both the trauma and grief that's experienced.
- Prolong the grief process: Grief is a process; it takes time to heal. When guilt intensifies, the grief and the healing process can take longer.
- Immobilize a person mentally, emotionally and physically: Intense guilt can lead to an inability to act and take care of what needs to be taken care of.
- Hinder well-being, productive action and positive relationships: Guilt feelings can begin to take a toll on relationships. The down or angry mood begins to affect those around the person. Guilt makes taking productive action difficult, and it is difficult to have a sense of well-being when guilt consumes a person.
- Keep the guilt ridden person "stuck": A person sometimes continues to stay stuck because they feel guilty about feeling happy, and therefore won't allow themselves to experience happiness. Guilt keeps a person from moving forward with their lives and doing what needs to be done.

Page 9 – How to Cope with Survivor's Guilt

- It is common to feel guilty about having survived when others died. These feelings may be worsened if someone died while rescuing you, or if you were unable to help someone else.
- Acknowledge your grief and guilt: The best time to deal with this begins when you first start experiencing the feelings. By acknowledging the feelings, you will be better able to cope. Denial just prolongs the problems.
- Realize your feelings of guilt are normal and common under the circumstances: Realizing this is a common reaction can help normalize the thoughts and feelings about the event.
- Seek support and talk to others about your experience and the feelings you have: Telling your story is one of the most powerful things you can do toward recovery. By talking to others who have experienced the event and who may also be having survivor's guilt can help you feel that you are not alone.
- Take this as an opportunity to reevaluate your life and make positive changes: Often after a catastrophic, traumatic event, people view the world and those around them differently. This can be an opportunity to evaluate your life, identify areas you aren't satisfied with and make changes. This can be a way of honoring those whose lives were lost.
- Realize that it's ok to let yourself be happy and thankful you survived.

Page 10 – How to Cope with Survivor's Guilt (Continued)

- Get involved with helping others: Helping others who were injured or who lost loved ones, (e.g. donating time or money to services that aid others) is a positive action that can give you a sense of control over a devastating situation.
- Practice self-care: It's important to eat well, get plenty of rest, exercise and give yourself permission not to be perfect.
- Allow yourself to grieve the loss: Not grieving keeps you stuck in the guilt.

- Recognize this as an opportunity to honor the deceased: Attend memorial and/or funeral services, and express your thoughts about the deceased to their loved ones.

Page 11 – Children and Survivor’s Guilt

- For younger children, use play to help them express feelings (e.g. imaginative play, puppets, drawing, etc.).
- Answer question honestly, but avoid giving disturbing details if it’s not necessary.

Page 12 – Helping Children Recover

None

Page 13 – In Conclusion

None

Page 14 – Summary

None

Page 15 – Questions

None

Page 16 – Resources

None

Page 17 – References

None

Page 18 – Thank You

None

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