



Regrets

Dealing with the "If Onlys"

If only I'd encouraged him to go to the doctor sooner. If only they'd stayed home that night. If only I'd known what to do. Feelings of regret are common after the loss of a loved one. But, left unchecked, they can lead to guilt and shame, which can complicate your grief and slow the healing process. The good news is you don't have to be stuck in a place of regret and guilt.

This week's exercises and video will help you find freedom from those troubling thoughts. You'll discover:

- **The importance of challenging your "if onlys."**
- **Better things to focus your thoughts on.**
- **God's response to your regrets.**



Video outline

Use this outline to write down important concepts, encouraging words, or questions you may have while viewing the video.

What's in your backpack?

"If only I'd done more to help."

"If only I'd made another choice."

"If only I'd been more loving."

"If only I could get past the shame."

Unpacking your regrets

Examine your guilt & shame

Avoid isolating yourself

Avoid second-guessing yourself

Learn from past regrets

If necessary, seek forgiveness

Receive the ultimate pardon

Step by Step

Daily comfort & encouragement



Cori's story

"I felt incredibly guilty after my sister drowned. I thought, *Why wasn't I there? Why didn't I help? Why didn't I save her?*"

Wishing you could have done something differently in the events surrounding your loved one's death is normal, but dwelling on these thoughts can quickly lead to feeling stuck in a place of guilt and regret. In this week's exercises, learn strategies for moving forward from guilt and regret, and find out why other people and a change in perspective are vital for this process.



How others can help

Regrets are common in grief. *I wish I had done this ... If only I had said that ...* The problem with regrets is that they often lead to feelings of guilt, and even shame. One way to manage these emotions is to talk with other people about what you've been thinking and feeling. Other people can help you determine if you're dealing with false or true guilt. Counselor David Bueno Martin says: "When you share that guilt in community, that helps you heal."

Other people offer a new perspective

"I lay awake at night thinking, *Oh, Lord, I wish I had taken him to Duke [Hospital],*" shares Annie. "Why didn't I think about it? just punishing myself. One thing that helped me was talking to other people. I thought it was my fault because I didn't take him to Duke. But one of my friends told me, 'You did all you knew to do.' Which is true."

Other people can pray for you

In the Bible, God encourages you to ask trusted friends to pray; they can share your burden (Galatians 6:2) and join you in bringing your struggles to God. Let them know about your feelings of regret, guilt, or shame, so they can know what to pray for.

1. **Who could you talk with about your feelings of regret (e.g., friend, counselor, GriefShare leader, pastor, relative, etc.)? Who will you ask to pray for you?**

2. Say you had a friend who told you he's been beating himself up with blame over a decision leading up to his loved one's death. What would you say to help him?

2 False guilt



If you've been berating yourself about what you "should have" done differently to prevent your loved one's death, counselor H. Norman Wright gently reminds you:

Sometimes we confuse responsibility with accidents. "I should have been home." "I shouldn't have let him buy that motorcycle." "I should have filled the car with gas." Maybe the

"shoulds" need to be challenged because in many of the situations, we find out there wasn't much you could have done. Even if you had done something or hadn't done something, it doesn't mean the accident wouldn't have occurred.

Other grieving people have come to realize they shouldn't feel guilty when they haven't actually done anything wrong in God's sight. "We make the best decisions we can at the time, and sometimes the outcomes are not good," says Bryan. And Jody echoes, "I handled it as best I could."

Now, if you haven't done anything that defies God's will, as revealed in the Bible, the guilt you feel is false guilt. But if you realize that you *have* done something wrong, there is hope. God is a compassionate, forgiving God. Please turn to page x to find out more.

If you're not clear whether you are dealing with true or false guilt, share your concerns with a few people you trust and who are familiar with Scripture (a pastor, counselor, a few close friends). Ask them whether they think your guilt is false or is based on something you need forgiveness for. Getting multiple perspectives from godly people who have a deep knowledge of God's Word will help you. The Bible says, "There is safety in having many advisers" (Proverbs 11:14b NLT).

3

Is my loved one upset with me?



Many people feel they have unfinished business with the person who died. Maybe the last words you said to your loved one were angry or hurtful. Or maybe you'd been holding a grudge against the other person or had an estranged relationship. If you wonder, *Will he or she ever forgive me?*, the Bible offers this reassurance:

"You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God himself, who is the judge over all things. You have come to the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect" (Hebrews 12:23 NLT).

The Bible says those people whose spirits have gone on to be with the Lord have been "made perfect." As such, it would be impossible for them to hold a grudge or be unwilling to forgive someone for anything he or she did wrong. Just like God, who is perfect, they too would forgive and have nothing but love for others.

So, you can rest in the knowledge that your loved one is not angry or upset with you. Any ill feelings that may have existed before the death are no longer present with him or her.

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Think helpful thoughts

If you keep thinking negatively about the choices you made surrounding your loved one's death, God instructs you on what is more profitable to think about. Otherwise, you'll tend to worry, doubt, feel unreasonable guilt or shame, and place blame, which makes your grief even more difficult to bear.

The Bible says, "Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8b NLT).

How might you apply this verse to stop thinking about the if onlys? Jan, who lost her son to suicide, advises, "Think about the things you did right. We can always think of the things we did wrong."

Instead of focusing on your regrets: Write down some positive (honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy) things you did for your loved one.

Tell yourself the truth

"Let's say a grieving person is feeling guilty by having the thoughts of, 'I should have done something differently,'" explains counselor Dr. Elias Moitinho. "The person needs to replace the self-condemnation thought with a reality-based thought. ... And what is the reality? 'I did the best I could under the circumstances.' That will help [you heal from your grief]."

"You have to come to the place where you realize, 'The truth is, I did the best I could with what I knew at the time.' And you move on," says Jan.

Think about what is true: List the limitations you had during this time (e.g., time, money, knowledge, expertise) and the truth of your situation.



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Healing through *Writing*

Countering regrets

When the “if onlys” replay in your mind, it can help to work through your regrets on paper. These prompts can guide your writing.

- **God directs us to replace unhelpful thinking with honorable, true, and right thoughts—and “keep putting it into practice” (Philippians 4). How could you do this? Describe what it would look like. If you practiced this for a month, what changes would you see in your mental health?**
- **Write about any “unfinished business” between you and your loved one that weighs on you. Who could you talk to about this? Reflect on the Bible passages this week that address this.**

Chart your progress

Place a check in the boxes to identify how you are feeling this week: emotionally, physically, etc.
Or, even better, insert a word to describe how you are doing.

	BAD	OKAY	GOOD	GREAT
Emotionally				
Physically				
Spiritually				
Relationally				
How your life is in general				

My Healing

Cori's story

"That guilt that I felt over [my sister] dying and my lack of prevention or intervention was false guilt. Acknowledging that I felt guilty is okay, but I had to sift through and look at it and think, *What is the truth here? Was it my job to save my sister? No. Should I have been there? Not necessarily. Did I know this was going to happen? No.* Sifting through and asking those hard questions is really important so that you know what is true and what is a 'piece of truth' stuffed with a huge lie. We can end up expanding our grieving process by taking on unnecessary responsibility for someone else's actions or death."

Next session

Get insights on facing grief as a family.