

# Surviving Survivor's Guilt

## What is survivor's guilt?

Survivor's guilt is the negative thoughts and emotions we have because we "survived" something bad and someone else did not. When someone near us dies, loses their job, gets sick, etc., we may find ourselves with thoughts like:

- It could have been me
- It should have been me
- It might be me in the future
- It's my fault
- I should have done something different
- I deserved this more than they did
- I don't deserve to be OK

## Why do we experience survivor's guilt?

Serious negative experiences violate our **world view** — the shorthand understanding of how the universe works that everyone has. Some common ones include:

- Good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people.
- The world is safe.
- People are good.
- Life is fair.

You've probably already noticed something about these examples — they aren't 100% true. But they are true *enough* that we can live our lives as though they were, and we may be OK . . . until something goes wrong. When something bad happens, we come face to face with something that, according to our shorthand understanding, shouldn't have happened.

Survivor's guilt is what happens when we try to make the negative event fit into our previous, inaccurate world view. For example, if life is fair, but my friend who is a better worker than I am got laid off and I didn't, then me keeping my job caused a violation of how the universe works. But in reality, we've always known that life isn't completely fair — and it isn't completely unfair either.

## **How can I combat survivor's guilt?**

***Identify the world view that has been violated, and add some nuance to it.*** Your new world views might include:

- People often get the good or bad they deserve, but there are a lot of other factors that influence what happens to them.
- The world is safe for many people much of the time, but there is danger too.
- Many people behave in good ways, but sometimes people make negative choices.
- Life is a series of events which we exert some control over but can't completely direct, and fairness is only one consideration in how things turn out.

### ***Let go of guilt and blame.***

Human beings love order and control. We want there to be clear cause and effect, because if we can find the cause we can prevent bad things from happening (and make good things happen). We want things to be someone's fault, so we blame others or ourselves — and guilt is just another word for blaming ourselves.

When we accept that sometimes things are not under anyone's control, we let go of the need to blame someone — including ourselves.

### ***Switch your language from "should" and "shouldn't" to "wish."***

There is no universal set of rules that governs the universe every time, so what "should" or "should not" have happened is irrelevant. Recognize that when you say you think something should or should not have happened, you are expressing a wish. What you wished for didn't happen. That's disappointing, but not guilt inducing.