

Survivor Guilt 101:

Let me make it very clear here, I have no degree or extensive background in counseling in the area of “survivor guilt”. I do have PTSD and I think most traumatized combat veterans with PTSD have some form of survivor guilt, but this is just my opinion. How people handle survivor guilt is as complicated as, and as simple as, you want to make it to be. But I feel that I can speak plainly and from a perspective that is down to earth and real. It is my hope that those who read this article will take away some positive ideas and seek professional help to better understand what they are dealing with and how they can make peace with survivor guilt. Survivor guilt like PTSD is not your fault. You didn’t go looking for it. Like PTSD, survivor guilt is manageable and you can deal with it once you understand what you are dealing with. I am very interested in hearing back from those who read this article and giving me your thoughts and comments. We veterans are in a group by ourselves as far as combat trauma goes and you need to know you are not alone and that a lot of us know exactly what you are feeling.

One of the issues I have tried to deal with in my own life as it relates to my own PTSD is dealing with the effects of survivor guilt. I have been diagnosed by counselors with this condition and over time I have come to recognize and accept that it is a fact in my life. What do I do about it and how do I handle survivor guilt? I asked myself these questions and if you have asked these questions or others as they relate to survivor guilt, then you are ready to want to deal with it in your life. I don’t pretend to know it all, but I want to share with my fellow veterans some of the things I have learned.

From my perspective, survivor guilt is one part of the emotional attached baggage that is related to PTSD. PTSD can be thought of as a horribly disfiguring wound, yet the only person who can really see and feel the wound is the individual. Others only see the symptoms of those wounds when stressors set off PTSD in sometimes odd and irrational behavior. The problem is that an individual with PTSD appears on the surface as if nothing is wrong when in reality the individual is in constant torment and needs help. Now add to this, survivor guilt, and the effects of depression and sadness is unimaginable to someone who doesn’t suffer from it.

Survivor guilt also has the potential to compel an individual to remain mired in his or her past, to the relative exclusion of their present or future. Guilt is the penance one pays for the gift of survival or so it seems to me, and in many combat veteran survivors I have known.

I think of Survivor Guilt as part of PTSD. So my approach to Survivor Guilt is the same for PTSD: If you don't recognize the symptoms and don't know that it is affecting you because of your combat experience, or some other traumatic confrontations, then Shipoopee you can't take a proactive approach to the problem. Simply put, if you don't know what the emotional and intellectual obstacles are in your life, then how can you get a handle on PTSD and survivor guilt and how they relate to you specifically. Again my feeling is that if you can't connect the dots from what happened back then and how it is affecting you now, then you can't deal with it properly. Life, and the problems in our life, is often like the mosquito in a nudist colony. We know what we would like to do, but we just don't know where to begin! So let's begin and see what we can understand.

Now, let's get a little Cerebral here. Again, as I have thought about this stuff over the years, whether thoughts running through my mind or forming questions, these are some of the things I have asked: 1) Why did I live when someone else didn't? 2) Maybe they should have lived and I should have died? 3) Maybe the other person would have had a better life and had more to live for? 4) Was there anything I could have done to help that other person or persons? These were some of my questions. Yours may be different, but they show a need to know and understand the WHY?

I think what happens in combat trauma when we experience horrible things and see others killed, often our friends and buddies, we don't have any processing time to really think things through. More often than not we direct what happened to these others as partly or maybe totally our responsibility. I have come to the conclusion after a great deal of thought that a lot of combat trauma veterans with survivor guilt attach responsibility in the wrong place. Look, it is perfectly natural and right to feel sad about someone having died in a traumatic situation, but I don't think that it is appropriate or rational to feel totally responsible for another person's death in a time of war. The War, the enemy, the nature of the battle should be blamed and not those who live through it.

Behaviors of survivors after their experiences in traumatic situations where others die and they survive can be identified in broad categories:

1. Death Imprint: A person is assaulted with death in such an intense way that the images are permanently burned into their mind. These memories are constantly on the mind of the victim and contribute to an intense realization of his or her own mortality.
2. Survivors' Guilt: Why am I still alive when others have perished? Survivors' guilt is connected primarily to the intense feeling of powerlessness experienced by the individual in situations he/she doesn't control. Also there is the concern on the part of survivors for their own lack of feeling, probably because they are dealing with things too intense and too horrible to deal with at time.

3. Numbness: Used to explain the lack of or inability to experience emotions. It is a defense mechanism to avoid overwhelming memories, thoughts and emotions and in doing so creates a withdrawal between the victim and human contact. Does this sound familiar to you?
4. The Search for Meaning: Because of a survivors' continual confrontation with death and other traumatic experiences, the survivor attempts to understand why these horrors happened to him or her, and the reasons behind these events

These identified areas allow for the unresolved issues that a survivor can be experiencing forty or fifty years later and why combat veterans wait to get help for survivor guilt. Why would a tough combat veteran want to appear to have emotional weakness or let any one else know it? Why? Because we are human and stupid at times and when you add to this the not knowing what the Hell is going on in your emotional life, or why, it's very difficult for the combat veteran. I know because I've been there! What I know, and have witnessed in other combat veterans, is that the veterans among us that are most traumatized are the least likely to seek help due to their fears of weakness and vulnerability to which asking for help applies. When an individual is experiencing survivor guilt they often times, more than not, may feel helpless, powerless, sad and full of shame.

If you feel that you have survivor guilt from your traumatic combat experiences, it is not something that you can deal with on your own without some professional help. Like PTSD, Survivor Guilt is a clinical problem. It is a medical consequence from your traumatic combat experiences. I urge any Veteran who feels that they are suffering with PTSD and/or Survivor Guilt to seek good professional help. Use our resource links and please give us feedback on how you are doing. Your success story could be just the inspiration that another combat veteran needs to hear to encourage them that there is hope.

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