

# Grief Notes

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## Regret and Guilt in Grief by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

A loved one has died. Are you thinking about the things you wished you had done or said? If you are, you are not alone. It is the rare person who has no regrets after a loved one dies.

In 2004 Dr. Ira Byock published a powerful little book, *The Four Things That Matter Most: A Book About Living*. As a palliative care and hospice doctor, he learned it helps to voice these four things: **“Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.”**

Through his experience, he learned how much it helped the person who was dying and the person left to grieve to have said these things to one another. That is why this book born of working with the dying turned out to be a lesson in living. We can regret the things we do not say and can be helped by saying them.

After the death we think of opportunities missed. Often, we do not realize the end is near. So many deaths seem sudden despite years of illness and declining health. We get used to people pulling through a hard episode or hospitalization. We think there will be something more to try. We think there will be more time. We are uncomfortable or we believe they will be uncomfortable talking about death, so we avoid conversation that scares us. This avoidance can lead to regret for the things left unsaid.

Feelings of guilt often go hand in hand with regrets. If you have been a caregiver, then you know the physical and emotional exhaustion that goes with the role. You may wish you had not lost your temper, you had been more patient, you had spoken more kind and loving words. If you were not the person there every day, you may wish you had been more present, had visited more often, had called to support. If the end-of-life journey was long and painful you may feel relief when the suffering is over. This understandable and very human feeling can be uncomfortable to acknowledge and is one people feel guilty for having.

### Here are some suggestions to help when struggling with regrets and guilt:

- Talk with supportive friends and family
- Attend a grief support group
- Write about your feelings
- Read about grief (and see how common these feelings are)
- Attend to your faith
- See a counselor, especially if your struggle is making everyday difficult

Grieving the death of a loved one is one of our most difficult experiences. Before the death we struggle to do the best we can and after the death we struggle with our feelings of sadness and perhaps of guilt or regret. There is a place for forgiveness of ourselves and others as we find our way going on with our lives.

Please remember that Northern Light Home Health & Hospice bereavement coordinators are available to support you in your grief and let us know if we can help.