

Guilt and Frustration: How Changing Your Expectations Leads to Emotional Wellness

Guilt is a feeling so frequently experienced by family caregivers. Why? Because you thought that you could do more than you can; because you believed that you would do more than you are or because you know that you ought to do more than you are. If this doesn't quite speak to you, substitute the word "more" with the word "better".

Something that is so helpful to know is that feelings are the result of thoughts.

Think about this for a minute. Do you feel guilty if you believe that the person for whom you are caring is satisfied with all that you are doing? Do you feel guilty if you believe that you are doing the very best job ever as a family caregiver? Do you feel guilty if everyone around you applauds you as a family caregiver?

Something so helpful to also know is that feelings guide behaviours.

Guilt is such a useful emotion if it helps you stop doing "bad" behaviour! What is bad behaviour? It is illegal behaviour: if you are being a fraudulent family caregiver, the idea is to stop. If you are being a nasty family caregiver and yelling or pushing or shoving, the idea is to stop. So if you are not doing any of these "bad" behaviours, what are your best guesses as to the thoughts or awarenesses that are behind your feelings of guilt?

Frustration too is a feeling that is also frequently experienced by family caregivers. Why? Because you thought that you could manage everything that is coming up; because you expected that people would be nicer than they are; because you thought you would have more control over what is happening; because you didn't think you would be caregiving for such a long period of time; because you are realizing that people and institutions are not what you thought they were...

As a psychotherapist, I have been working with many clients over the decades. I see people overwhelmed by emotions as they struggle to simply lead their lives. Though you might have learned how to live your own life, when you became a family caregiver it brought its own set of circumstances that you never had a chance of knowing how to manage. Talk about being thrown into the deep end so to speak!

Tips for reducing (possibly even eliminating) guilt and frustration:

1. See that family caregiving is "on the job training"
2. Ask yourself how old you feel? If you are feeling guilty it could be that you are acting as if you are a young child and being scolded for not being/doing what some adult thinks is better. A reminder here is you are an adult now!
3. Remind yourself that you can make up your own mind even though others might not be in agreement. A reminder - that this is actually okay, difficult perhaps, yet okay. Consensus is not required simply preferred.

4. Choose what you consider to be the most important aspect of caregiving and focus only on having that meet your expectations.
5. Change your expectations with the new information that you are getting. If cousin Joe for example isn't following through on helping even though he says that he would, change your expectations of being able to count on him.
6. Accept that you can't do it all, nor can anyone else.
7. Give the option of family caregiving to the person who tells you what you should be doing differently! This one works so well and I am amazed that it is so infrequently used.
8. Have guilt and frustration parties with others using the following guidelines: the first 5-15 minutes only is for kvetching or complaining then move onto something else that is pleasurable and rejuvenating.

I recommend that you reread this from time to time and perhaps even share it with others.

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