

The Counselor's Corner

Unproductive Guilt

Last weekend I binge-watched *This Is Us*. It is a refreshing, well-written show for adults, and it contains insights about human behavior and family dynamics. In addition to the tender and loving moments, we are introduced to dysfunction. Although this is fiction, the characters are like us or those we meet. Some grapple with addiction, partly because of their genes and partly because of their avoidance of painful issues. They wallow in unwarranted guilt for years, and they turn to food, work, or drugs for comfort.

When the father dies, his children are teens, not adults. Like so many others their age, they are insecure, lack experience, don't know how to handle personal disappointments, and sometimes act obnoxious. If it had been any other day, they would not have scrutinized their actions. If it had been any other day, they would have realized they were just kids and in no way responsible for the decisions the dad had made.

As real people, we need to face unpleasant and traumatic events as quickly as possible. In our attempt to regain normalcy, we can harmfully push our feelings down. Instead of going away, they remain unresolved and fester, harming us physically, mentally, and emotionally. As parents we want to protect our children. Some want to spare children from reliving an emotionally negative event by avoiding the topic. They never give the child a chance to get in touch with true feelings, and they may naively stand by while the child is taking on unwarranted guilt.

Leon F. Seltzer PhD wrote an enlightening article in *Psychology Today*. He believes that **warranted guilt**, based on facts, is a good thing because it helps us to "take appropriate responsibility for a significant misdeed...." However, guilt that is not warranted has no place in our lives. Dr. Seltzer emphasizes the importance of acceptance of our human nature and self-forgiveness. He feels that trying to live by standards that are too high can result in self-loathing. We work and can only make decisions based on who we are at a particular time. His most powerful example was of a friend who did not break plans for another friend who was feeling bad and wanted company. Unfortunately, the other person got drunk and drove, and there was an accident. Although this was terrible, the friend could not make a moral decision for the person who drank and drove. The friend should not accept guilt for what had happened.

As a school counselor, I have seen children and teens suffer from unnecessary guilt. They take blame for things that are out of their control, such as

1. Fights, separations, or divorces.
2. The death of someone close.
3. Extreme use of alcohol by a parent, and the child's failure to stop it, even when they hide bottles.
4. Abuse from adults.
5. Surviving a car, train, plane accident, fire, or other disaster that has taken the life of another.
6. Being kept from discussing a murder or suicide in the family
7. Poor choices of a sibling or parent as a reflection on one's self.

Whether we or our children are experiencing any of the above or another form of trauma, we need to seek a support group or therapy. We need to face our pain as well as recall our age, limited experiences and tools, and other components that wove their way into our trauma. There is too much going on in our lives without letting unwarranted guilt take up space and impact our mental and physical health.

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