

Survivor Guilt

Today I want to talk about the concept of survivor guilt, a powerful concept that is insufficiently appreciated in psychology today. I believe that if we understand survivor guilt we can understand a wide range of psychological phenomena. In fact, I'd go further and argue that survivor guilt lies at the heart of the psychological suffering of most of my patients.—and many of the patients in psychotherapy today.

Survivor guilt is the guilt one feels at having survived (or even thrived) when others have not. It was originally noted among Jewish survivors of concentration camps and is often seen among survivors of other catastrophic events, such as natural disasters, the AIDS epidemic or military combat. In these dramatic situations, the guilt that survivors feel is often conscious and extreme. For

example, survivors might feel responsible for not saving others, or for saving themselves while others suffered or died around them. It's often marked by feelings of fraudulence, of being an imposter, all stemming from the belief that there was some mistake, something wrong with having survived a bad situation in which others suffered. Movies have been made that feature survivor guilt, such as *Sophie's Choice* and *Ordinary People*, as well as television shows like *Rescue Me* in which a New York City firefighter, Tommy Gavin, who survived 9/11, is visited by the ghosts of those fellow firefighters who did not. Survivor guilt is commonly seen in cases of PTSD, especially among veterans who suffer from painful memories of having survived combat that maimed or killed friends and colleagues.

Survivor guilt, however, does not have to be limited to extreme situations in which one's physical survival

is the imagined crime. In fact, most often, survivor guilt is not even conscious and only becomes apparent when investigated and uncovered in psychotherapy. In these cases, one uncovers the painful and guilty belief that the very fact of one's success in life came or comes at the expense of the welfare of loved ones. In other words, the underlying belief here is that enjoying the good things in life – – things like independence, financial or occupational success, success in love, trusting friendships, sexual pleasure, – – that all these things were acquired at the expense of others. Being happy itself is the crime, not survival.

For example, children of depressed or unhappy parents often grow up with the unspoken sense that they shouldn't be happier or more successful than their parents. This is a prime example of survivor guilt. The belief involves a feeling, however irrational it might be, that these successes are equivalent to

betrayals, or even that these successes are the causes of parents' failures. Such children live in a zero-sum world in which the more happiness they acquire, the less they believe their loved ones can enjoy. They grow up with a subliminal conviction that they're not supposed to be happy or successful because such good things feel like symbolic abandonments of their roots, or of their families or of their communities of origin. Their unconscious logic tells them that escaping a sinking ship is a crime.

Sometimes parents explicitly guilt-trip their children in just this way, begrudging their successes, and complaining about their children's lack of attention or help. The stereotype of the long-suffering Jewish mother suggests this dynamic. There's an old joke that goes:

Q: Why don't Jewish mothers drink?

A: Alcohol interferes with their suffering.

A parent's suffering, in other words, is used as a club to attack a child's success. Most of us have either directly experienced such a dynamic or have seen it up close.

Other times, children acquire survivor guilt based beliefs all on their own, inferring that they're supposed to share in the problems they see in their families, that such problems are simply the way life is supposed to be and—therefore- that achieving more is disloyal and unacceptable. If there is a lot of suffering in your family growing up, that becomes the family norm, the family culture, and being happy and successful represents a breach, a violation of these norms—a betrayal.

Examples of this dynamic abound in the public world. For example, we've all seen and heard the stories in of athletes or entertainers who grew up in dire circumstances, who then make a success of themselves, but who then manage to sabotage that success by using drugs or getting themselves into financial or relationship trouble.

When someone shoots themselves in the foot in this way, the unconscious intention behind it is to alleviate guilt. Success is the crime and failure is the punishment. Self-punishment, then, can be seen as the result of subliminal efforts to get rid of survivor guilt. What the person is doing is symbolically sharing the failures or disappointments of loved ones towards whom he or she feels guilty. The unconscious logic is: If everybody's in the same boat, then no one is betrayed, no one is left out or left behind. People with survivor guilt might drop out of school one semester short of graduation. Or take the example of someone growing up in a family with parents who had a very unhappy marriage – – children in this situation will often feel unconsciously guilty about having a happier marriage than their parents did. As a result, they will either choose a bad partner or screw up the relationship with a good partner-- all in order not to outdo, or reject, or leave

behind the unhappy parental relationships they saw growing up. That's survivor guilt.

People who succeed in spite of their survivor guilt—that is, people who don't sabotage themselves-- will often secretly believe that they're some place they don't belong and the result is that they feel like a fraud or an imposter as a result. This is also how survivor guilt can work. I've worked with many leaders, for example, -- successful people in positions of authority who are plagued with the vague but painful sense that they don't belong in the position they find themselves. The experience of fraudulence is almost always a result of survivor guilt. Such leaders invariably managed to undermine themselves out of obedience to and compliance with this guilt.

Many forms of psychological suffering and inhibition stem from attempts to retreat from good things in order not to surpass, leave behind, or otherwise

outdo one's family and community of origin. So, for instance, I've treated many women who were the daughters of unhappy mothers, and who then grow up having difficulty feeling relaxed and successful. Again, all of this is due to survivor guilt.

Such attempts to run away from success because of survivor guilt, when deeply understood, can yield a greater acceptance of one's authentic accomplishments and healthy satisfactions.

As spiritual teacher and author, Marianne Williamson, put it:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about

shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do.”