

Survivor's Guilt

Dr. Rodika Vahdat

In 4 Pages



A Self-Check & Grounding Guide

What is survivor's guilt?

Survivor's guilt refers to feelings of **guilt, shame, or unworthiness** experienced by someone who has survived, escaped, or is living in relative safety while others have suffered, been harmed, or lost their lives.

It commonly affects people who:

- Have survived violence, war, or repression
- Live in exile or diaspora while loved ones remain at risk
- Witness widespread suffering affecting their community or country
- Feel protected or spared while others were not

Survivor's guilt is **not a sign of selfishness or moral failure**. It is a deeply human response to loss, injustice, and empathy.

Common signs of survivor's guilt

Survivor's guilt can show up in many ways, including:

- Feeling undeserving of safety, comfort, or success
- Thoughts such as "Why me?" or "I don't deserve this"
- Difficulty enjoying life or moments of relief
- Feeling responsible for the suffering of others
- Avoiding rest, pleasure, or self-care
- Emotional numbness or persistent sadness

These reactions often come from **care and connection**, not indifference.

Self-Check Questions

Pause and gently ask yourself:

- Do I feel guilty for being safe, alive, or relatively stable?
- Do I feel uncomfortable when I experience happiness or calm?
- Do I compare my life to others and feel undeserving?

- Do I believe I should always be anxious, grieving, or alert?
- Do I struggle to care for myself without feeling shame?

If several of these resonate, you may be experiencing survivor's guilt.

Grounding & Coping Tools

1. Name the experience

Remind yourself:

“This is survivor's guilt , not a truth about my worth.”

Naming the feeling helps prevent it from becoming your identity.

2. Return to reality

Gently remind yourself:

- You did not choose to survive
- Your safety does not cause others' suffering
- Your pain does not reduce others' pain

You are not responsible for fixing everything.

3. Allow joy without betrayal

Experiencing moments of peace or joy does **not** mean you have forgotten others.

- Grief and joy can exist at the same time
- Continuing to live is not a betrayal

Being alive is not a moral failure.

4. Transform guilt into meaning

Instead of punishing yourself, ask:

“How can I live in a way that honors those who are suffering?”

This might look like:



- Bearing witness
- Acting with compassion
- Supporting others sustainably
- Living with integrity and humanity

Meaning heals guilt; punishment does not.

5. Practice self-care without justification

You do not need to earn rest.

- Eating, sleeping, and connecting are human needs
- Caring for yourself does not take away from others

Your wellbeing matters.

When to seek additional support

If survivor's guilt begins to interfere with daily life, relationships, or your sense of self-worth or leads to self-punishment or despair, seeking support from a mental health professional or trusted support resource may be helpful.

Final note

Survivor's guilt grows from love, empathy, and connection.
But you are not morally obligated to suffer in order to prove that you care.
Your continued living can be an act of remembrance, resistance, and dignity.

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