



# SELF-HELP EXERCISE: SURVIVOR GUILT

## INTRODUCTION

When there is loss from deployment or mission, it is not unusual for the surviving members of the unit to experience survivor guilt. Survivor guilt can be defined as remorse or guilt for having survived a catastrophic event when others did not.

While it was once a diagnosis in its own right, mental health professionals now consider survivor guilt to be a significant symptom of PTSD. It is often a common reaction that stems from a feeling of failing to do enough to prevent the event or save those who did not survive.

### Survivor guilt often manifests as one of three types:



1. Guilt about staying alive while others died
2. Guilt about the things they failed to do, which often leads them to relive the event again and again
3. Guilt about what they did do, such as running past others to escape

Identifying that you or someone you know may be experiencing survivor guilt can be difficult, but it is the first step in the healing process. Though the symptoms may vary, there are some common warning signs that could indicate a warrior is experiencing survivor guilt:



- ★ Flashbacks
- ★ Thoughts of suicide
- ★ Difficulty sleeping
- ★ Feelings of helplessness
- ★ Intense fear
- ★ Irritability and insensitivity
- ★ Apathy
- ★ Lethargy

**If you believe that you or someone you know may be experiencing survivor guilt, we encourage you to seek help from a mental health professional.**

## WHAT YOU CAN DO



### Ask Yourself:

- ★ Was there anything you could have done to have truly altered the outcome?
- ★ Did you really have time to think about possible actions and reactions before the event occurred?



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## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ★ Could you have known ahead of time what you needed to do to save your friend?
- ★ Were you in a position (at exactly the right place and time) to have stepped in?
- ★ Did you have the equipment and training necessary to have changed the situation?
- ★ Are you responsible for your friend's actions and the actions of unit members on the mission?
- ★ What responsibility does the enemy have for what happened?

**Write your thoughts on these questions below:**



If you answer these questions honestly, you will likely come to the conclusion that you did nothing wrong and that it's illogical to continue to feel responsible for another person's fate. Unfortunately, guilt is not something that is easy to control, and survivor guilt is a normal response to loss. Not everyone experiences this type of guilt, but it's often a difficult feeling to overcome. If you still feel responsible after considering the above questions, it is very important to seek help from a mental health professional.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE:

You may find it helpful to focus on how you're going to live your life differently now that you have lost your friend. Thinking about what the person you lost would want for you is a good reminder to take care of your own needs. It's also a way to find meaning out of a seemingly senseless experience. Working toward a worthwhile goal, or doing your best to live a good life, are fulfilling ways to honor fellow warriors you have lost.

