

When **Guilt** Comes Knocking

Practical ways to feel less guilt

When Guilt Comes Knocking

Three difficult moments in dementia care—and practical ways to feel less guilt.

Guilt is a natural part of caring for someone you love. This guide will not tell you how to feel or promise to make guilt disappear. It offers another way of looking at three difficult moments—and one small action you can try in each.

Three moments:

1. the truth question,
2. the anger question,
3. the self-care question

Should I always tell the truth?

This might be close to home.

I remember standing outside Mum's room in the rest home, taking a deep breath before going in. I never quite knew what I would be walking into—or what she would believe that day.

Generally, Mum thought Dad was having an affair, and that was why she had been “put” into the rest home. She felt abandoned.

I knew the truth. Mum needed care around the clock because of her dementia, and Dad would never have had an affair. But I also knew that explaining this usually left her distressed, confused, or upset. So, I would find myself searching for another response—one that helped her feel safe, heard, and understood.

Every time I did this, a little voice in my head would say:

“This isn't honest, and I'm being disloyal to Dad.”

Yet the kindest thing I could do for Mum was often to respond to how she was feeling:

“That must feel terrible. I can see you're really sad. What do you think happened?”

I hated being in that position.

Another way of looking at it

Some dementia professionals call this therapeutic fabrication—although you may also hear people describe it as stepping into the person's reality. It means saying something that is not literally true to reduce distress or help someone who can no longer understand the situation because of changes in their brain.

Simply knowing that there is a term for it can help release some of the guilt. It reminds us that this can be a thoughtful and compassionate response—not a careless lie.

It is about meeting the person where they are, instead of continually trying to pull them back into our reality.

Sometimes that might mean saying:

“The doctor wants you to stay here a little longer.”

Instead of repeatedly explaining that they are now living permanently in residential care, particularly when they cannot understand or retain that information.

At other times, it means responding to the emotion rather than correcting the facts:

“You sound frightened.”

“You really miss Dad.”

“I can see how upsetting this is.”

Every person and every situation is different. There are no hard-and-fast rules, and there is no perfect way to handle every conversation.

Try this

Before answering the person you care for, pause and ask yourself:

Will telling the literal truth help—or could it cause more distress? What emotion might sit underneath the question?

Experiment: Choose one repeated question

Think about (or jot down if that helps) one question you find difficult to answer honestly. Beneath it, note the emotion you hear and think of a kinder response that acknowledges the person's reality.

Try that response next time. Notice whether their reaction—or the way the conversation feels—is any different. This is an experiment, not a test.

Remember

There is no perfect way. Let yourself off the hook today; give yourself a moment.

You matter too.

Is it wrong to feel angry and frustrated?

I arrive to see Mum on my way to work, and she is very soiled. I take the time to help her get cleaned up. I help her into the shower, which, as you may know, can be a difficult task in itself—and leave her in a lovely warm shower while I get her some clean clothes.

When I return, she is screaming that it's cold. She hates it.

“Why are you torturing me?”

How do I feel? **Angry. Impatient. Frustrated.**

And I don't understand what has just happened. I'm confused. I'm trying to help Mum, yet she experiences it as though I'm hurting her.

It's normal to experience difficult emotions when you're caring for someone with dementia.

I can love Mum and feel angry with her. I can understand that dementia is affecting her reactions and still feel frustrated by her behaviour. I can want to help while also wishing I could walk away.

One emotion does not cancel out another. Anger does not replace love or kindness. Feeling frustrated does not mean you are uncaring, and losing patience does not make you a bad person.

Anger, frustration, confusion, resentment, and other difficult emotions are completely normal responses to an extraordinarily demanding situation. The feeling itself is not the problem. What matters is recognising it and deciding what to do next.

The Powerful Pause

Notice → Make things safe → Pause → Release → Return

Notice the signs that anger is building. Make sure the person you care for is safe. If you are concerned that you might hurt yourself or the person you care for, step away if it is safe to do so and seek urgent support. Then permit yourself to pause—leave the room, sit in the car, or come back to the task later if you can.

Take the feeling somewhere safe. You might cry, breathe slowly, walk, move your body, write, sit quietly, or talk to someone you trust. You are not pretending the anger is not there; you are allowing it to move through you without directing it at the person you care for.

Return when you feel calmer, try a different approach, or ask someone else to take over. If a short pause is not enough, that is useful information: you may need a proper break.

Try this

Think about (or jot down if that helps)

Make your pause plan: Notice → Make things safe → Pause → Release → Return

How will you recognise that you need to pause? Where can you safely take the feeling, and what helps you release it? Who can you contact if you need more support?

If you discover that you need a break, that is okay, and it is an important realisation. Talk to someone you trust, your family, a health professional or a support organisation, and explore how you can make that happen.

Remember

Anger does not cancel love. What matters is how you respond to it.

Difficult emotions are normal. Find a safe way to acknowledge and release them.

Is it okay to look after yourself?

The automatic and obvious answer is yes. Of course it is.

Yet when you are a carer, looking after yourself can be remarkably hard to do. You would tell your best mate to take a break, accept some help or enjoy a little time for themselves—but you may hesitate to give yourself that same permission.

There may be many times when you feel guilty for enjoying yourself without the person you care for being there.

I remember Dad's 80th birthday. Our family was together, celebrating him, talking, laughing, and enjoying being in the same place. Mum was not there with us. I could feel the happiness of the occasion—and, at the same time, the ache that she should have been part of it.

Christmas often felt the same. I would bring Mum home for Christmas lunch, and there was love, food, laughter and the pleasure of having family together. But just for a short time. Then it got a bit hard. Guilt would arrive before and after lunch: How can I be having a good time when Mum is not here? Should I be doing more? Why is it so hard to have her with us?

Enjoying yourself does not mean you have forgotten the person you love.

Laughing does not mean you care less. Taking a break is not the same as abandoning someone.

Looking after yourself is not taking love away from the person you care for. Rest, movement, friendship, laughter, and time away help you remain a whole person and able to continue caring loving, and laughing with the person you care for.

Self-care does not have to be grand. It might be ten quiet minutes, a short walk, listening to music, having coffee with a friend, moving your body, spending time outside, or keeping one activity that reminds you who you are beyond the caring role. It also means accepting practical help before you reach a crisis point. For me, it meant accepting that a happy hour with Mum at Christmas was OK, and better for me than the stress of a full afternoon.

Looking after yourself is not a reward you have to earn. It is part of making care sustainable.

Residential care or bereavement may remove some of the practical demands, but grief, exhaustion and the effects of prolonged stress can remain. Ongoing care for your own health matters both during and after caregiving.

Try this

Think about (or jot down if that helps)

Choose one small thing that restores you, five to fifteen minutes is enough. It could be a walk, music, coffee with a friend, time outside, movement, laughter or quiet.

What will you do, when will you do it, and who or what could help make it possible?

Maybe you already do it. Write down the ways you already look after yourself—and give yourself credit for them.

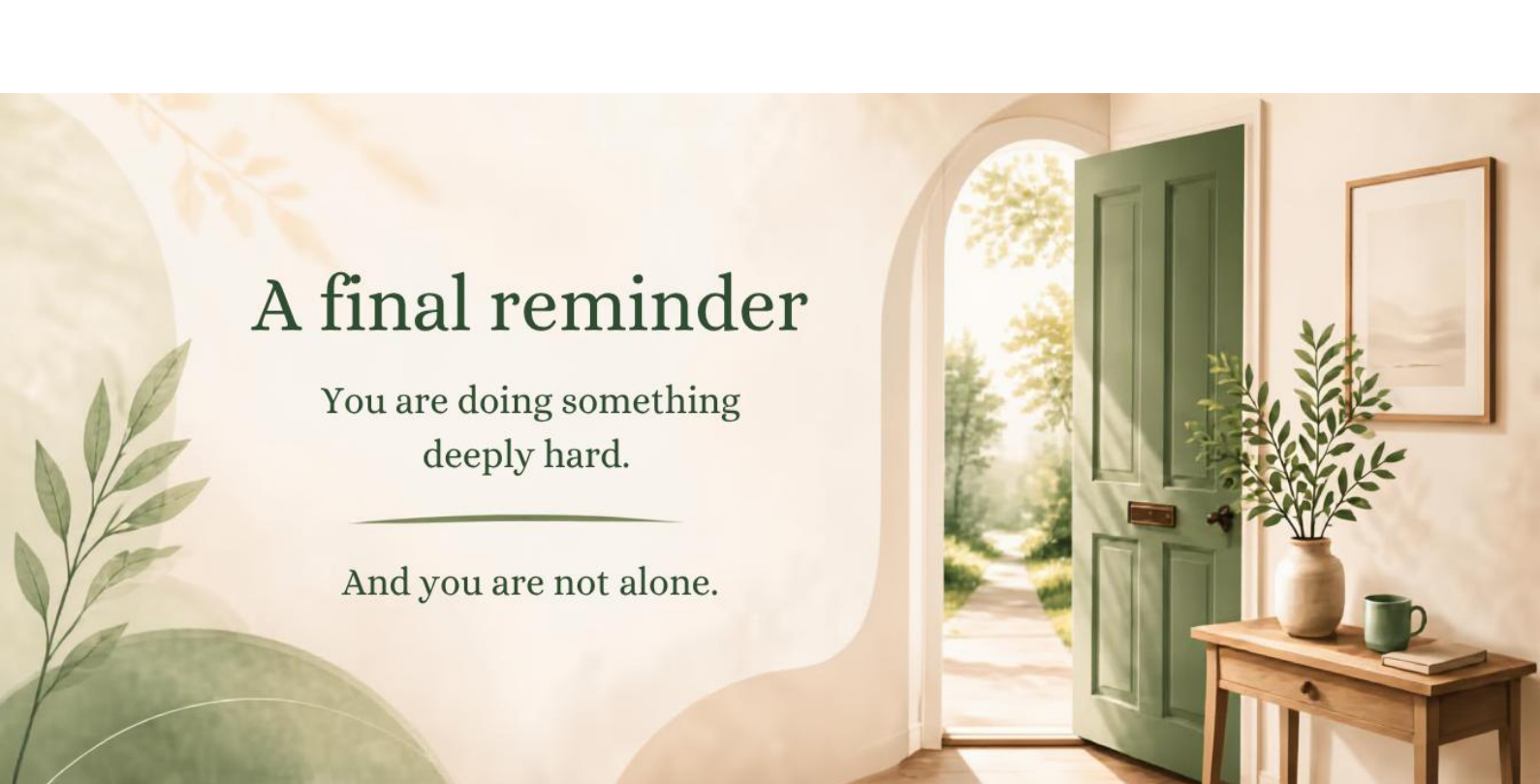
Now consider – 'Is there anything I could add to look after me better?'

If you would readily encourage your best mate to do this, try offering yourself the same kindness.

Remember

Looking after yourself does not take love away from anyone.

You matter too.



A final reminder

You are doing something
deeply hard.

And you are not alone.

Love is not perfection.

It is continuing to notice, adapt, and care, again and again.

And that includes caring for you, too.

If guilt, frustration, or the weight of caring is becoming too heavy, please reach out—to someone you trust, your healthcare team, or a dementia support organisation.

If you'd like a safe, compassionate space to talk and find practical ways forward, I also offer one-to-one health coaching for carers. You are warmly invited to get in touch.

Gill

Gill Lambert Health Coach
HCANZA accredited Health Coach
REPS registered Personal Trainer



You can contact me on –

Email: gill.lambert@gilllamberthealthcoach.co.nz

Facebook: [Gill Lambert Health Coach](#)

Website: [Gill Lambert Health Coach](#)

Take a breath. One small step at a time—there is support ahead.