

A Parent's Story 5:

Guilt



My journey has been defined by guilt. It began with the allegation of guilt, followed by a guilty verdict, and resulted in my own feelings of personal guilt as I navigated the ordeal of my children's father serving a prison sentence of 20 years.

My husband at the time was arrested when my youngest was 10 months old. It took 18 months until conviction, while we continued to establish ourselves as a family unit. When he was sentenced to 20 years it was the biggest shock of my life, in fact I was in shock for about a year. We didn't expect it and we were so unprepared. On some level, I couldn't face it. I leapt into helping his appeal, questioning the extent of his guilt. I was fighting his corner, maybe I was in denial. I kept repeating that he was really made an example of, that it was a first-time drug conspiracy. I colluded with him to not take responsibility and clung onto the fact it was odd sentence.

I had my own issues with my Husband at the time, but I didn't know the extent of his offences and the full situation. I discovered a lot of stuff in the lead up to the trial and appeal. This brought a level of guilt and shame of my own. How could I not have known? Could I have done something? Was it my fault that my kids, 2 and 4 when he was convicted, were abruptly separated from their father? Had I contributed to their trauma? I thought I knew who he was when I married him, did I do a terrible thing by thinking I could change him? It was a dark time.

The only way I could cope was to focus on him in prison. I brought the kids to see him every week without fail. He would call every day. In some way, by ignoring his guilt, just focusing on practicalities and keeping him involved in the family, I could put a lid on my own feelings of guilt and shame. I was living and breathing the family unit to keep us together; taking photos and helping the kids play games on the phone with him. I would take them to visit and because he only saw them for short windows, he'd refuse to discipline them if they acted up, which meant they got mixed messages from us both and I had to play the 'bad parent'. I was making sure his relationship wasn't jeopardised with the boys, so I put his relationship with the children ahead. I worried about the behaviour of my children, and felt bad chastising them. Again, feeling guilty and alone.

He would say to me, 'I've already lost Sam'¹ (my youngest). Through his prison sentence I've had to come up with ways to lessen his absence and bolster their relationship. Sometimes it felt as though I was filling in the gaps he'd created, in a way, taking responsibility for his crimes.

¹ name changed for purposes of confidentiality

When COVID hit, all visits stopped. The boys went from seeing their father once a week to nothing but calls for 15 months. I look at this now as a transformational time. Distanced from the logistical and practical aspects, I had to face both the reality of his guilt and my own feelings of guilt and shame. I also had the time to revisit our relationship before the sentence, reflecting on our entire history together.

Just before his appeal I told him I was separating from him. I didn't want him to think that, if his appeal was denied, I was only ending things because he was going away for a long time. It was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made. I was wracked with guilt, and he took it badly. He had expected me to stay, to support him. Argued that if the tables were turned and if I was in a coma, he'd stay by my side. Said that I'd previously been so supportive, given him a false sense of security and now pulled away.

The truth was, the guilt of what I was putting my children through, how abnormally we were living our lives, began to eclipse the guilt of separating from him. I just wanted to be happy, but I didn't want to leave him behind; I couldn't have both and I couldn't be responsible for him. People would say that there was an umbilical cord between us, and that I needed to cut it off. He needs to process and accept his own guilt and that's the only way it's going to move on. He still needs to let me go and accept responsibility.

I was aware that I might be making a really big mistake, but I had to do it because, when someone goes to prison, your relationship can just stay in suspended animation. I was holding on for a past that I didn't want in the future.

When I was supporting him as his wife, he would be apologetic, but since I've left him, the blame has shifted, he's incredibly upset with me. I find it so difficult to manage meeting someone new, the guilt is overwhelming.

I found Children Heard and Seen through Instagram. The support they've provided has been fantastic. I have received 1:1 sessions for my child, helping to process his emotions around his father's imprisonment, and I have been able to meet people in the same situation as me; lessening both my guilt and isolation.

I think I'm a different person having gone through this experience, and so is he. I've changed massively and will continue to. I don't regret anything; you don't grow unless you push yourself. It would have been very easy for me to stay with him, but I couldn't stay with him in name only. Letting him down has been horrendous. It's still hard for me to admit.

It's made me stronger as a person and a bit tougher. I always want to help everybody. Sometimes you just can't please everyone and there's nothing more important to me than my own inner peace. I was so worried about what everyone would think and feel but now I'm a bit more resilient to it. I'm toughening up to the fact that people will judge me. Let them have their judgements, it doesn't define me and my situation, I judge people on how they are with me.

Mostly, I'm learning to forgive myself for moving on. It's not a crime to want to be happy.