

Finding A New Normal

Adapted from: <http://www.seniorlivingmag.com/finding-a-new-normal/>

A friend in his mid-50s cared for his wife for over 10 years before she died from complications related to her chronic and often unpredictable disease. He juggled being a business owner, a husband and a caregiver. After the initial shock and grief of losing his wife, he found himself wondering what his life was going to look like if he was longer a husband or caregiver.

He allowed himself to grieve his wife's death with self-compassion, and gave himself permission to experience feelings of sadness, anger, and joy in her memory. He realized he could commit to friends and family on simple evening plans and even booked an extended vacation for the first time in over five years. It took time for him to work through his learned response of expecting difficult news, and to experience a regular sense of optimism and hope again.

Another friend, in her mid-60s, cared for her life partner who was 10 years older than her. He had a stroke and the care was physically and emotionally exhausting. She recalls that he couldn't speak due to aphasia and he required daily assistance with his personal care. When he died three years later of a second stroke, she found herself feeling a range of emotions: relief, anger and guilt.

Feelings of loneliness were pervasive immediately following his death because she realized she had lost touch with her social and leisure connections while caring for her husband. Her sense of purpose vanished. She also experienced big swings in her emotions. Even though her husband was gone, she felt moments of intense anger towards him, quickly followed by guilt. She took the opportunity to seek a counsellor to support her. Slowly, she rebuilt her community of friends through regular social gatherings and returning to her fitness regime. Volunteering for the local brain injury society mentoring other caregivers gives her joy and purpose.

Of course, there is no single answer to how to process caregiving and life after it ends. It depends on a caregiver's emotional temperament, the relationship between the caregiver and the person they cared for, the circumstances around the death of the loved one and the time and energy spent as a caregiver, among other factors.

Both of my friends relayed a few common take-aways:

- It takes time to process the caregiving experience;
- Being patient with oneself and showing self-compassion daily;
- Finding support during the caring experience – and afterwards – was pivotal in finding a new normal post-caregiving.

After living with a loved one with major health and mobility changes, neither caregiver takes their own lives and abilities for granted. In fact, they are both focused on living life with joy, intent and purpose.

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