

Life after caregiving

Adapted from: <https://thecaregiverspace.org/life-after-caregiving/>

Caregiving is an emotional roller-coaster ride and will continue to be even after the caregiving journey ends.

Grief, guilt, resentment, and loneliness may be familiar feelings but they can affect you in new and unexpected ways after the caregiving process is over. Depending on the end of your journey, whether the loved one you cared passed away, had his/her health improve or left home, you are likely to experience some emotions more than others. Guilty feelings arise when you start caring for yourself again and when you try to resume the life you had before your loved one needed care. Just know that you did everything you could as a caregiver. Even the “best” caregiver isn’t perfect. Assuming the role of caregiver takes a lot of love and support—undoubtedly, it was appreciated. Often guilt will be tied with the relief you feel after your loved one moves on. It is natural to feel a sense of release, especially after a job as physically and emotionally demanding as caregiving.

When your loved one has moved on from your care, your life can feel like a vacuum.

Not only are you dealing with the loss of your loved one but the loss of the life you knew during your time as a caregiver. Your grief may feel overwhelming and endless. Time will help. But until you have reached a place where the pain is much less, don’t be ashamed to seek help from friends, family, support groups, and medical professionals, especially those that have experience with caregivers. Join our bereavement group here.

Address family issues

Your caregiving experience might have created some resentment towards friends and family members who were absent or distant during the care process. These feelings can turn very sour after your loved one has moved on and you are no longer occupied with constant care. It is important to remember that your friends and family might not have understood the level of attention your loved one needed. Perhaps they were uncomfortable facing a friend’s mortality. Or maybe they felt you were pulling away from them and did not know how to react. Whatever the reason, it is often easier to move past the minor incidents so that we may begin to heal with compassion, love, and honesty.

Focus on *you*

While you were devoting all of your effort into maintaining your loved one’s health, you may have forgotten to take care of your own. Don’t worry, it happens. But it is crucial for your well being to get to the doctor as soon as you can and get a physical. Increase your exercise, maintain a balanced diet and start a meditation practice, if you haven’t already. Meditation can feel impossible for caregivers who are used to having all of their loved one’s needs, as well as

their own, on their mind at all times but there are ways to ease into the practice of letting go of thoughts. Take a walk while you focus on your breathing. Or sit without distraction breathing in aspirations and breathing out toxic thoughts. Meditation is about living in the moment so why not ask yourself questions about the moment you are in to help you regain focus? What are you enjoying about the moment? How do you feel? What are you learning? What skills are you honing? What are you hearing? Avoid imagining a past or future moment. Just focus on now. A strong meditation practice will influence your ability to deal with life's terms. When we encounter emotional or physical pain, we often freeze up and stop breathing. But the focus on our breath in meditation eventually becomes part of our instinctive reaction to broader experiences.

Get the help you need

When dealing with grief, meditation can only go so far in the healing process. It might be necessary to involve a mental health professional, especially one with a history working with caregivers. There is nothing to be ashamed of in seeking help from a professional—it does not make you weak. You don't have to grieve alone. Hospitals typically offer bereavement support groups and your community might as well. Take a look out at our online bereavement groups to share your experience with other caregivers. Talk to your family and friends about your feelings, although it can require some courage on your part. Your relationships might feel strained after the isolating experience of caregiving. Asking for help is always a way to open the door and invite others in. Self-reflection is a very important tool. Family and friends may encourage you to focus on the future rather than dealing with the past. But this is absolutely necessary to do especially since your caregiving duties did not leave you with much time to self-reflect. Take stock and journal; pick out some of the most meaningful experiences in your caregiving journey. You will be glad you dealt with the painful emotions sooner rather than later.

Keep giving back

In addition to self-care and reaching out, you might consider filling your life with some volunteer work while you get your life in order. Maybe a certain organization helped you and your loved one tremendously—give back by volunteering there! Or perhaps you found some aspect of caregiving particularly frustrating—find others who feel the same and fix it! Volunteer work can give you purpose, great experience, and another venue to connect with others. Just don't take on too much and burn yourself out!

Put your finances back together

Resuming your old life can be complicated. Whether you have been a caregiver for years or only for some months you may have given up your job, changed your residence, or become financially insecure. Not only are you putting your life back together but you are laying your loved one's matters to rest. This can be painful and confusing, not to mention completely overwhelming. But take a deep breath, and do the first thing first. Assess your situation: What bills need to be paid? How much money do you need to get by? How much money do you

have? Do you need to go back to work? Is there a financial planner available to help you? Accomplish the easiest, most pressing things first to start narrowing your lengthy to-do list down to something manageable. Are any of your friends or family members talented at organizing and prioritizing? If so, call them. Get help from your back-ups. You're going to need it more than ever. Think of it as a form of self-care. There is no sense in burning yourself out after the caregiving process is over.

Once your present life stabilizes, think about your next step.

If it means going back to work, present your time caregiving as a marketable and productive period. Caregiving is a powerful skill set. It calls for negotiation skills, team development, project management, logistics and learning technical language related to the fields of finance, law and medicine. Make sure to showcase these as you re-commence the interview process. You might find caregiving to be a future career. Or perhaps you want to work behind the scenes and help create policies that give caregivers better access to emotional and medical support. Maybe your future career has nothing to do with caregiving, but your experience caregiving can be put to good use nonetheless.

Life's stages are unpredictable but their occurrence is certain. When we are taken through grief, relief, joy, and desire, we must remember the freedom that follows acceptance and the pain caused by expectation. The (perhaps trite) phrase, "time heals all wounds" should remain stationed at the center of feelings that seem endless.

Keep compassion, honesty, and love close by, and when your world begins to fall apart, always reach for the nearest phone, pen, or hand to help you pick up the pieces.

You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website www.CaregiversNS.org. For more information, contact us toll-free at 1.877.488.7390.