

After Caregiving Ends

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There is a natural sense of loss when the need for our caregiving is over. We must often face the double sorrow of losing a loved one and our purpose or role in their lives.

The aftermath can be a very difficult time that leaves us feeling lost, lonely, and useless. We may not feel grounded without that important function of taking care of another in our lives. Our direction may feel unclear. The future may look bleak or even empty.

If our self-confidence was based on the job we were doing, we may experience a shift in self-esteem. Our confidence may drop or diminish. It may be hard to pick ourselves up and start over again.

The first step after any kind of loss is always to allow and accept our feelings. We must acknowledge this shift in our lives and the feelings it may provoke. It is possible that we'll feel relief that we don't have to work so hard any longer, and then feel a sense of guilt for feeling such relief. We may be angry with ourselves or someone else for letting us down. All of these are natural reactions. It is important to express our sadness, anger, loneliness, regret, and whatever else we may feel.

It is also important that we listen to ourselves and appreciate what we feel as we go through the mourning process. We must accept reality and forgive ourselves and others now that the loss has occurred. Those are not always easy steps to take, but our healing depends on our willingness to move forward and let go of the past feelings and resentments, regrets and disappointments. The future is a blank canvas. We have a choice as to how we approach it.

Starting a new life is now the job ahead. That is what we face as we allow ourselves to fully grieve. We need to take a deep breath and grasp the fact that our new purpose in life is how to begin again without the physical presence of the one we cared for, and minus the job of caregiving.

As much as we might wish to, we cannot avoid the fact that change is what is demanded of us now. It may seem a monumental task to create new lives. However, starting over can be done in baby steps, with one new activity at a time, or one telephone call or even with one minor change each day.

We all have different reactions to starting over. For some it is like climbing a mountain that is too rocky and too steep. For others, even though it may feel like a blind walk through a forest, starting over is something we are familiar with, something we've done before. We know we will eventually find our way. And for those lucky few who deal with life as an adventure, there may even be some excitement at discovering the new, unexplored lands or places that lie ahead after caregiving is over.

Taken from HFA's bereavement newsletter, *Journeys*, April 2001. For more information about this and other resources, contact HFA at 1-800-854-3402 or www.hospicefoundation.org

