

# What Now? After Your Loved One Has Passed

By Cassandra Van Dyck



People enter in to and live their caregiving roles in very different ways. Some might have been thrown in to a caregiving role after their loved one was diagnosed with a quickly progressing illness, and may have quickly had to figure out how to manage their days and care for their spouse or parents. Others roles might have evolved slowly. Maybe their parent gradually needed more of their time and attention as years passed, only needing a great deal of their time in the final months. Some caregivers may have had short journeys of a few months or years, and others longer, such as ten years or more; much like a marathon. Everyone's journey is different, but all caregivers can likely agree that during the months or years as caregivers for their loved ones, the health and well-being of their spouse or parent was always on their mind. So, what does life look like after a loved one is gone? What consumes your thoughts? How do you feel? What do you do?

The days or weeks after your loved one passes will likely be very busy. There are often things to think about, like having a service for them, letting family and friends know, and getting documents and finances in order. After things settle down, you might feel any host of emotions: grief, relief, frustration, or even confusion. Sometimes when life has been so scheduled and full – when you've been responsible for someone else's well-being for so long, it can feel very strange when those responsibilities are no longer there. You might even be surprised by how you feel, and uncertain of how to proceed with your life. You could be wondering how you will fill your days now that your loved one is gone. This article will focus on some emotions and hurdles that you might face after your loved one has passed away, and provide tools for how to engage with the changes and difficult feelings.

## **Guilt**

*“Leverage guilt feelings as they come up; remember that they are flashing indicators that something has to change... take this energy and transform it from “drain to gain” by using a “key*

*word" with strong emotion and physical movement to anchor this positive change into your physiology – It's a powerful tool for staying more centred because it's firing new behaviour patterns in the brain."* – Cheryl Brewster

Guilt is one of the most common and challenging emotions that can come up after a caregiver's partner passes away. There can be a sense of relief and intense guilt when you no longer have to manage doctor's appointments or provide physical and emotional care for your loved one at home. Caregivers might hesitate to talk about feeling relieved that their loved one is gone, because they don't want other people to know.

**Know that feeling relief after your loved one passes is valid.** Caregiving can give you a strong connection with your spouse or parent and bring you closer in a lot of ways, but it comes with many challenges and a steep learning curve as well - especially if your caregiving journey was long, or your care partner was faced with a difficult illness such as advanced dementia. Just because you feel relief, it does not mean that it's the only emotion you're experiencing. Of course, you miss and love your family member. You are also allowed to experience relief after all you've been through with them. Remember to let yourself off the hook. Just as you did not feel comfortable with your caregiving role right away, you will need some time to adjust to life after your loved one passes.

If you find that the feelings of guilt are not relenting, seek support from a professional counsellor or therapist. Consider joining a grief support group (some local groups are listed in our Wellness Corner) to connect with other caregivers who are likely experiencing much of what you are.

## **Loneliness**

Although your days may have been challenging and busy, you had a companion that was with you a lot, if not all, the time. The depths of loneliness you might feel after your loved one passes can be hard to predict and harder to manage. You have not just lost someone you've cared for, you've lost a friend, or possibly a parent or life partner.

You likely saw your friends and other family members less when you were caring for your loved one, and you might have lost touch with some people you were close with. Perhaps you're unsure how to connect with new people or reconnect with those you've lost touch with. Sometimes it can be hard to realize you're lonely when you're grieving, but you might notice you're feeling disconnected, or realize that you haven't been hugged or laughed with anyone in a while. You may miss the feeling of purpose that caregiving can provide.

## **Take one small yet important step.**

It might feel hard to reach out to the people whose phone calls you've left unreturned, but they would likely be happy to hear from you. Picking up the phone or sending an email is the hardest

part. Consider joining a group with people who share your interests, such as a jogging club or a pottery class. Learning new skills with other people is a great way to connect and shake up your current mood when you're feeling isolated.

## **Uncertainty**

Caregivers who've recently lost a loved one might feel a general sense of uncertainty about what's next in their life, especially when they've lost a spouse who's been a partner for many years, and sometimes even or most of their life. They might wonder what's next for them, and could feel stuck - unsure of what to do next.

Remember to be gentle with yourself, and take things one day at a time. Commit to one small thing every day that is an act of self-care or exploration. Go for a long walk by yourself, or meet a friend for coffee. Just as your caregiver role likely didn't evolve over night, neither will this next phase in your life. Take the time you need to think about what you'd like your life to look like. Have you thought about volunteering, or traveling to some place new? Is there something you've been wanting to do but haven't been able to do because you've been so busy? There are likely several questions you'll want to ask yourself, and it's okay to move slowly.

One ending and another beginning is never a simple process. Challenging emotions will come up, and there may be days when you don't feel like getting out of bed. Remember to be kind to yourself, and try to lean in to the discomfort. Call a friend, join a support group, and open the blinds when the sun shines. "And this too, shall pass away." – Persian Sufi poet

A Loving Kindness Meditation to aid in your journey: Sharon Salzberg: Lovingkindness Meditation (Audio Book)