

Loss and Grief in Caregiving

November is National Caregiver's month – a month to celebrate and honor all of you who are caring for your spouse, parent or friend. Over 25% of households in the United States are involved in caring for an older adult. Isn't it wonderful that so many people are dedicated to helping those they love? Being able to take care of your loved one in their older years is a joy and an honor. But caregivers also know that their job is not always joyful, or easy! In fact, there is a lot of loss associated with caregiving. Some of the more obvious things that caregivers lose are jobs/careers, social interactions, free time and often their own well-being. Other losses are less clear, like when you are feeling sadness and grief but can't quite explain exactly what it's all about. For example, you may feel like you have already lost your loved one even though they are still alive. This ambiguous loss is particularly difficult to overcome because it is often brushed aside as not being real. When losses are not identified and feelings of grief are not validated, depression will often follow. I'm sure all caregivers will agree that they have experienced various losses as a result of their caregiving role. Most of these losses are unavoidable and must be faced. Grief is the emotional process of working through these losses. Grief can be experienced in many different ways. Some common responses to grief are anger and frustration, shock and denial, disorganization, helplessness and fear, guilt and regret, sadness, and fatigue. The most important thing is that the caregiver recognizes their losses and how they are responding, and then allows themselves to grieve.

How does a person grieve? Let yourself express all of the emotions you are feeling. Find a good friend, therapist or support group where you feel safe to share your feelings. Find a private time and space to gather memories and savor that which was lost. Write in a journal. Take care of your health. Stay in touch with friends. Say "goodbye" to life as you knew it and say "hello" to your life as it is now.

The phrases "work through your grief" and "learn to let go" are common, giving the impression that the sadness and pain of your loss will end one day. But some grief and sadness will never completely go away. Living under the impression that you can somehow make your pain and grief disappear may be setting yourself up to fail. Dealing with loss is not forgetting that which you have lost, but learning how to integrate those losses into your life and move forward. It has been said, "You never get over a loss; you just get different."

One last suggestion to all of you hardworking caregivers: Give yourself a pat on the back for all that you do. Treat yourself to lunch with friends, a few hours doing your favorite hobby, a manicure or massage. You have definitely earned it. And remember, you are admired by many for your dedication and selflessness. Keep up the good work!

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