

When Caregiving Ends

Taking care of a loved one takes a lot of time and energy. Your own needs move lower on the priority list as you spend more time caring for your loved one. You start saying no to the weekly coffee clutch, decrease the number of days you participate in volunteer or paid work, leave your favorite hobbies on the shelf and slow down your travel plans. As your loved one needs more and more assistance it is tempting to just drop out of everything so you can be there for the person as much as possible.

While your intentions might be good, giving up things you enjoy also has negative consequences. The stress of intense caregiving can put your physical and mental health at risk now and leave you vulnerable when your role as caregiver is over. When deciding what activities to give up to be a caregiver, don't just think about your life situation now but also ask yourself the question, "What will I do when I am no longer needed as a caregiver?"

I have been spending a lot of time thinking about what a caregiver's life is like when caregiving ends. The death of my father left my mom with an entirely new life ahead of her. She went from having her days filled with caring for my dad to a world in which she lives alone. For several years she put her activities on hold and put Dad's needs first. During that time, I encouraged Mom to keep doing some of those things she really loved, even if it was infrequently. At the time, my hope was to keep her healthier and happier by designating time out of the week for herself. But now I see that keeping active in those activities was important in another way, too. Finding a new routine for her life now is a little easier because she remained involved with those activities. Had she given up everything, her whole identity would be lost now.

No matter what, life after caregiving will be a transition and will be a difficult adjustment. Here are some points to consider that may help you when your job as caregiver has ended.

- Begin thinking about your future when you are still a caregiver. Having some long-term dreams and goals will make this transitional time easier.
- Time helps – while you will never forget your loved one, as time passes it will become easier to find your way in life without that person.
- Accept and express your feelings of loss, loneliness and whatever else you may be feeling – keep attending your caregiver support group, join a grief support group or find a trusted friend to share with. Seek help from a counselor if your grief leaves you overwhelmed by feelings of depression or hopelessness.
- Reconnect with things and people you used to be involved with.

- Look for new challenges – a new job, volunteer work or planning a trip somewhere you’ve always wanted to go will help you focus on positive things.
- Keep busy, but allow for quiet times to grieve. Reflect on what you’ve been through, be proud of the good work you did for your loved one and let go of any guilt you may feel.
- Change is the name of the game – reshaping your life and creating a “new normal” is what you need to do, but it is not done overnight. Give yourself time to find your way.

Even if you don’t want to think about the death of your loved one, start creating a plan for what your life will be like after caregiving has ended. It isn’t selfish to look at the future in which your caregiving role is over; it is simply practical and healthy. If you are able, involve your loved one in this discussion as they most likely want you to be happy, too. Life after caregiving happens, and it may even include a new, fulfilling adventure.

If you have questions about caring for a loved one or would like help in your caregiving journey please call the ADRC at 262-833-8777.

*Jane Mahoney
Older Americans Act Consultant
Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources*