

LIFE AFTER CAREGIVING

(Excerpts) By Sandra O'Connell from <http://www.caregiver.com>.

In the midst of the great balancing act that is the caregiver's reality, another kind of life seems impossible. And when it is over (YES, caregiving does end) there are new challenges in finding a life not consumed by your loved one's illness.

The intense pain and anguish of those years is behind me now. A "new normal" has emerged from the days when caregiving ended. Now I find contentment, if not joy. I laugh more than I cry. And at last have recovered my health. The journey has not been a straight line.

Detours abound for depression, resentment, loneliness and grief. Finally, there come moments, hours and then days, and at last there are weeks and months when the stress of those years does not dominate my life. Perhaps my experience will help those trying to find their way to a "new normal" after being a caregiver.

There is no right or wrong way—each journey is individual—I only suggest a few guidelines to adapt as your own.

FIND YOUR OWN WAY TO GRIEVE. The overwhelming feeling of most caregivers in the initial stage of loss is not grief, but relief. For caregivers of someone with memory issues, relief will often trump grief. The person you once knew has been fading away for several years.

Most approaches to grief counseling don't cover the unique feelings that come after years of caregiving.

It helps to not add guilt over feelings of relief to the grieving process. Eventually the pain of grief abates.

Here are my suggestions to help the process:

- write in a journal
- go to a support group
- find solace in your faith
- talk with friends
- see a counselor
- cry as you need to

Grief, however, does not vanish. Occasionally, without warning, like an errant wave, the pain of loss will tromp you. Each successive wave tends to subside more quickly and leave less damage.

REGAIN YOUR HEALTH. Your body has most likely paid a price for your turn at caregiving.

Now is the time to put YOU at the top of the priority list... chronic stress is hard on you, mind and body. Now is the time to pay attention to your needs.

Feeling healthier gave me enough energy to do what is truly healing: engage with my community, develop new interests and friends, and spend time with people who care about you.

BUILD A "NEW NORMAL". Building a life with meaning and relationships is the challenge faced by each person after caregiving. Accept that it will not be the life you enjoyed before the illness.

Pay attention to your own needs. ...sometimes the loss will involve major changes such as reduced finances, or moving to a new home or new city.

Take the time to make big decisions with care. Focus on what you want and need, not others' expectations.

RE-ENGAGE WITH LIFE, ASK YOURSELF WHAT WOULD:

- Offer a new challenge?
- Make a contribution with the skills I have acquired over a lifetime?
- Not ask too much of me at the beginning?
- Help me to meet new people?
- BE FUN?

Eventually, day-by-day and step-by-step, a "new normal" will emerge. The experience of caregiving will always be a part of who you are, but the experience needn't define your future.

Sandra O'Connell (SOCauthor@ gmail.com) was the caregiver for her beloved husband who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at age 69 for 13 years as well as co-caregiver, from a distance, for her mother who had vascular dementia, not uncommon for someone in her ninth decade. She has been a member of the Speaker's Bureau of the National Capital Area Alzheimer's Association for more than 12 years. She now enjoys an active life in Ashburn, VA.

Resources: AMA Caregiver Self-Assessment Questionnaire www.Caregivers.Library.org

Bereavement after Caregiving, by Schulz, Hebert, and Boerner. Pamphlet from National Institutes of Health www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2790185