

6 Things Caregivers Should Know About Their Grief

Insights into the complex process of caregiver grief.

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How to Grow Hope

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- Caregiver grief is often complicated.
- You may miss your role as a caregiver, even if you found it highly burdensome.
- It is normal both to feel great sadness and relief after your loved one passes away.
- Your relationship to your loved one can further complicate how you experience and process your grief.

Being a caregiver, or someone who provides a lot of help and support to a loved one, is a complex and challenging role. Research clearly demonstrates that caregiving can be one of the most stressful and demanding roles, creating an immense burden on the individual. But it can also be full of great benefit and meaning-making for some caregivers, especially as they spend last moments with their loved one. For most caregivers, the role rarely falls into only one of these categories. Rather, the caregiving role is simultaneously taxing and rewarding, making caregivers' relationship with this role complicated.

Due in large part to the complexity of emotions involved in being a caregiver, the type of grief caregivers experience when their loved one dies is also complex. Caregiver bereavement is extraordinarily complicated and can be hard to process. On the one hand, caregivers' grief is immense as the caregiver was often close to the person they were supporting. On the other hand, removal of the stressful demands of this role can provide relief. That feeling of relief often brings with it feelings of guilt for feeling relief that your loved one is no longer alive.

All these variables are further complicated by the relationship the caregiver had to the loved one needing care. Often, individuals are forced into roles of caregiving because there were no other options or persons to care for that individual. Thus, not everyone is a willing caregiver or has a fully positive relationship with their loved one. And depending on how their loved one dies, some of the final days can be emotionally taxing as they watch their loved one pass away or lose cognitive abilities.

Given the complexity and severity of grief that can be felt as a caregiver losing a loved one, it is helpful for caregivers to keep these six things in mind about grieving the death of their loved one:

1. It is normal to feel relief after your loved one dies. The role of caregiving is demanding – often socially, financially, emotionally, and physically. In many cases, your role as a caregiver can occupy as many hours as a second full-time job. As a caregiver, you often see your professional and personal life suffer greatly as you struggle to provide as much care and support to your loved one as possible. It is completely normal and even expected to feel some sense of relief in no longer having to play that role. The important thing to remember is that the sense of relief is tied to the role, not to your care or love for your loved one.

2. The more meaningful you found your role as a caregiver, the more likely you are to experience immense grief. Prior research indicates that the more meaningful a caregiver finds their role, the more they suffer in bereavement. For instance, those who report seeing a benefit to caregiving also report higher levels of depression and grief following the loss of a loved one. You spent an immense amount of time with that person, especially in their final days. This closeness can be both immensely meaningful but extremely painful once that person is gone. There is a real missingness to your loss– you may miss the person physically and/or emotionally. You may miss the sense of accomplishment or meaning your role as a caregiver brought to your life. These feelings are completely normal. It can be helpful to seek support to cope with this loss, either through friends and family and/or through a mental health professional.

3. You may miss your role as caregiver, even if you found it burdensome. Although the role of caregiving is extremely burdensome, you often become used to these caregiving rhythms in your life. From cooking and preparing meals to assisting with toileting, bathing, and dressing or being physically close to your loved one – there is a lot of time and space taken up

by providing care for someone. When this is suddenly gone, some caregivers report missing that role and not knowing what to do with their newfound time. A great way to begin coping with this is to introduce an activity or hobby that you like. You can even make it something your loved one liked so there is a lasting connection with that person.

4. Most caregivers report that the role of being a caregiver makes their grief both better and worse. In coping with the death of a loved one, those providing care for their loved ones often report both positive and negative outcomes of serving in that role prior to the person dying. On the positive side, there can be a sense of accomplishment or even an improvement in family relationships. On the negative side, however, serving in this role can leave individuals with painful images of their loved one dying or even feelings of failure or regret at how they fulfilled their caregiving role. What can be helpful is both to remember the positive aspects of your caregiving role, focusing on how it felt to be with your loved one in those good moments, but also to process and work through any lingering negative emotions, fears, or feelings of failure you may have. Remembering that most caregivers do the very best that they can in their role can be a helpful reminder.

5. Your relationship to your loved one may complicate your grief. Often, caregivers have complicated relationships with the loved one for whom they are providing care. Although some caregivers experience predominately positive relationships with their loved ones, many caregivers experience a complex set of emotions towards the person who died. This can further complicate the grief and how one feels in the face of that person dying. Prior research indicates that one of the greatest predictors of complicated grief is one's relationship to the person who died. So, if you have mixed emotions about the loss of your loved one, that is completely normal. You may feel relief they are gone. You may feel regret you didn't have a better relationship with them. You may feel resentment you had to care for them in their final days. All these emotions are normal and valid.

6. Social support is one of the greatest benefits in coping with complicated grief. Prior research clearly indicates that social support plays a key role in helping someone cope with grief, especially complicated grief, following the death of a loved one. Thus, in your grief, it is important to seek out social support where you can. And remember that seeking out professional help in the form of counseling can also be a beneficial tool in coping with bereavement.