COPING WITH Bereavement

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LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT

Everyone experiences loss during life. However, for Carers many of the changes and losses experienced come quickly and often. These losses can lead to feelings of grief.

Grief is a natural reaction to a loss.

It is not an illness. It is as much a part of your emotions as joy, sadness etc. Grief can occur not only through death (bereavement) but also from major changes and losses in our lives, such as:

- Separation or divorce;
- Changing or losing your job;
- Moving or migrating;
- Children leaving home;

Everyone experiences loss sometime during their life. Losses such as the death of a family member may be very obvious to other people. Personal or private losses may be less obvious and not always recognised by other people yet still very painful.

Some of the losses that Carers talk about include:

- Being a Carer and losing your sense of being and individual. You may also lose your independence, privacy and time for yourself;
- Missing out on employment and career opportunities and your financial security being affected;
- Not seeing friends or family due to caring commitment;
- Missing the relationship you used to have or might have had with the person you care for;
- The person you care for going into residential care so you feel you are no longer valued or needed.
- These kinds of losses may affect your self-esteem and confidence and your hopes and dreams about the future. You may also experience grief before an actual loss occurs.
- This may happen when someone you care for has a terminal illness and you know you will have to face a loss.
FEELINGS OF GRIEF

Everyone responds to grief differently. If you are grieving you may sometimes feel physically unwell as well as emotionally upset. Physical symptoms can include shortness of breath, dryness of mouth, loss of appetite, crying, tiredness and sleep problems.

Grief can also cause deep feelings of loneliness, anger, fear, guilt, rage and resentment, confusion, ongoing sadness, not wanting to go out or do the things you used to do. These symptoms can be frightening but are normal reactions to grief.

Recognising your grief and talking about how you're feeling can help. Making some time, each day, for yourself and having some plans in place for those bad times may make it easier to cope.

Some of the signs described above may also be symptoms of other problems so it’s a good idea to talk about them with your doctor. Make sure your doctor knows about your caring role and how it affects you. If you are feeling very anxious or fearful, have trouble looking after yourself or think about hurting yourself, it is very important to get professional help from your doctor, a counsellor or a psychologist.

ONGOING GRIEF

There may be no clear beginning or end to your feelings of grief. In some cases, loss may be felt for years or sometimes for a lifetime. The constant reminders may make it difficult or impossible to resolve your feelings of grief.

Carer support groups can help you get through times when your grief seems overwhelming. They can also be a safe place to talk about feelings such as anger and resentment. Walking, or any form of exercise, deep breathing or writing in a journal are other safe ways to release angry feelings, blame or resentment. For some people crying can be a great release.
RELATIONSHIPS

Caring for a partner

Caring for a partner can mean changes to your relationship. It can be hard to feel romantic when it seems that you’ve become more like a nurse or parent, and less like a spouse, lover or friend. These changes can be difficult to adjust to and it may take a long time for some Carers to feel comfortable in these new roles.

Caring for a parent

For some people caring for a parent is an opportunity to repay the care they received as a child. For others, finding themselves in the role of caring for a parent can be very upsetting. You may miss having someone you can turn to for support or feel uncomfortable about providing personal care such as bathing and toileting.

Caring for a child

Caring for a child with special needs can be both rewarding and challenging. Parents expect that their children will grow up to become adults and start their own lives. Parents may grieve for the hopes they had for their child for the future. Carers may feel frustrated they can’t stop what is happening to the child or solve the problem. They may feel guilty about having less time and energy to spend with other members of the family. They may worry there are not enough services to support their child.

CARER GROUPS

Whatever your situation there is a Carer group you can join to meet other Carers with similar experiences. Carer groups can be a safe place to talk about your worries and to hear how other Carers have coped with difficult situations. Carer groups offer different types of support and if you find that one particular group doesn’t suit you then ask about others in your area.

Your Carer Resource Centre can help put you in touch with Carer groups in your area. You can find details of your local Family Carers Ireland centre by calling our National Freephone Careline on 1800 24 07 24

STAGES OF CARING

When you first become a Carer

Becoming a Carer may be a slow and gradual transition or it may happen overnight. If you have gradually taken on a caring role by doing a few extra tasks it may have taken a long time for you to become aware of the changes in your life.

If you became a Carer as the result of an accident, the birth of a child with a disability or a sudden illness the immediate changes in your life and your relationship with the person you care for may be very frightening and stressful. You may have mixed feeling about the changes in your life. These are normal feelings and reactions.
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After you’ve been caring for a long time

If you have been a Carer for a long time you may have stopped thinking about the things you would like to do and instead spend all of your time thinking about the things you have to do.

You may have forgotten what your life was like before you were a Carer or you may think about it all the time.

Other people might expect that you are used to being a Carer and you don’t need their help and support anymore. You might not remember the last time anyone asked about you.

Trying to maintain your interests and activities is a very important part of looking after yourself. It’s not selfish to be healthy and happy. In fact it can make it easier to continue caring.

WHEN YOUR SITUATION CHANGES OR YOU STOP BEING A CARER

In the future, your role as a Carer may change. The transition of moving someone into residential care or adjusting to the death of the person you cared for is not easy. There will be changes in your routine and lifestyle.

You may miss the companionship and at the same time be relieved to have more time for yourself. You might feel guilty or worried about what to do next.

If you are considering residential care you might wonder if you are making the right decision:

• Will the person I care for be looked after properly?
• What will other people think of me?
• Have I done everything I could?
• Am I a failure because I can’t care for them at home anymore?
• What will I do with my life when I am not so busy?

It can be hard to think about your own needs but it’s important to be realistic and try to decide what’s best for everyone including you. Only you can decide if the responsibility of caring is too much for you. Remember there are still many ways to help care for your relative or friend even if they are living in a nursing home.

If the person you cared for dies your whole life can change.

Other people may understand that you feel grief for the person who has died but they may not realise that you can also feel the loss of not being a Carer anymore. Good days and bad days may come and go. It may take a long time for you to get used to a new routine.

You may miss all the things you used to do and the workers you used to see and life may seem very lonely.

If you feel it's been a long time since you had the energy to do things you like to do, or if you feel you’re not really interested in anything, then a bereavement counsellor may be able to help. Talking to them about your loss and what it was like being a Carer may help you start to feel like trying to get out and about again.

Where can I get more information?

Family Carers Ireland provides a publication on bereavement for Carers entitled The Carers Companion Handbook and offers a free bereavement counselling service where funding is available.

You can contact your Local Resource Centre who can provide you with more information on available supports and services, or, contact our: National Freephone Careline 1800 24 07 24.