**Begin Again: Reclaiming life after years of caregiving is a gradual, up-and-down process. These expert tips can help ease the transition.**

Wynn, Paul

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For 10 years, Deeann Gutenkunst of Hartland, WI, looked after her husband, Charlie, who had Alzheimer's disease. She managed his medications, drove him to doctors' appointments, and handled all of his basic needs, from cooking his meals to bathing and grooming him. When he died in 2016, she was stunned by how lost she felt. She recalls a shopping trip to the grocery store in the days afterward. “I walked around the store and looked at the food and didn't even remember what I liked to eat. I was so used to cooking for Charlie and planning our meals around what he liked.”

When Sharlene Young's husband, Jack Hsu, died in 2016 after living with Parkinson's disease for 18 years, she struggled to find her identity. “Taking care of him was such a central part of my life for so long, and then suddenly there's this huge void.”

**INTO THE VOID**

As Gutenkunst and Young know firsthand, being a caregiver can be all-consuming. It requires juggling doctors' visits, keeping track of medications, and managing moods. Caregivers may also have to cook meals, clean the house, and bathe and groom the person for whom they're caring. On top of that, they may spend endless hours worrying about their loved one's health and future. It's not surprising that when the person they're caring for dies and their job as a caregiver ends suddenly, they feel adrift.

“You're not only losing a spouse, family member, or loved one, but you're also losing your job,” says Denise Brown, founder of http://CareGiving.com and author of *After Caregiving Ends, A Guide to Beginning Again* (Tad Publishing, 2014). “When caregiving ends, you have to fill two voids: the void left by the death of your loved one, and the void left by the end of caregiving. You're feeling the impact of two significant losses.”

To help former caregivers move past those losses and find renewed purpose and joy, we asked people who've been there and other experts for their advice. Here's what they recommend.

**EMBRACE GRIEF**

Even before a loved one dies, it's common for caregivers to experience grief, says clinical psychologist Julie Mayer, PsyD, co-author of *Meditations for Caregivers* (AARP, 2016). After the person dies, the grief may grow more intense, she says. “Grief is a mixture of sadness and love. My advice is to feel the sadness even though it hurts, and remember that the love will always be there.”

That was true for S. Lynne Borkowski, who cared for her husband, Ron, who had Parkinson's disease for 15 years. “Every day I took care of him I loved him more and more, but I was also grieving,” she recalls. “When your spouse has a chronic disease that takes a daily toll, you are grieving every day that you're caring for him or her.”

For Gutenkunst, her grief was so overwhelming that it led to depression. “I never realized that grief could hurt so much. My heart literally ached,” she says. Over time, she slowly emerged from the fog. “Now, I'm putting the pieces back together and trying to figure out my life.”

Grief is especially complicated for caregivers because it is sometimes mixed with a sense of relief, says Dr. Mayer. “Toward the end of caregiving, the loved one's needs can be so extreme and emotionally difficult that there can be a sense of relief that caregiving is over and the pain for them is over as well.”

Caregivers whose grief interferes with their ability to function should talk with their physician or seek formal counseling or therapy, says Maisha Robinson, MD, assistant professor of neurology at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, FL. She advises looking for grief and bereavement services in your area, such as those offered at local hospice organizations.

**LEAN ON STRENGTHS**

Everyone deals with loss differently, but the skills developed as a caregiver can help, says Brown. “Your loved one's death doesn't end who you are. You're still caring, loyal, committed, strong, persistent, resourceful, tenacious, smart, courageous, fun, and funny. And those traits will stick with you as time moves on.”

**SEEK SUPPORT**

Many former caregivers find solace in support groups, especially those that focus on grief. (Check out GriefShare at <http://GriefShare.org> to find a group in your area.) Jim Myers of Roswell, GA, remains active in the Well Spouse Association (http://wellspouse.org), a group he joined when his wife, Jane, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2015 and died later that year. He says people in the group can relate to what he's been going through. He's also involved in his church group. “Without these groups, I'm not sure I would still be here,” he admits.

Borkowski and Young continue to participate in their local Parkinson's disease support groups. “If it hadn't been for my support group, I would have had a much harder time taking care of Ron,” says Borkowski, who recommends remaining in a support group after losing a spouse. “Those connections will help lift you up,” she says.

Young says her support group has helped her redirect her energy in a positive way. She became a research advocate for the Parkinson's Foundation (http://parkinson.org) to help support research projects to find better treatment options for patients.

**STAY ACTIVE**

The grief of losing a spouse and the abrupt end of an intense bout of caregiving affects emotional—and physical—health. Surviving spouses often develop health problems in the weeks and months that follow, which is why survivors have to be especially mindful of their health during this time, says Brown. “Don't forget basics like eating a healthy diet and getting light exercise like walking. Focusing on your health will make you feel better and take the edge off your feelings of loss.”

If possible, consider resuming work, taking on a new home project, starting an exercise program, or going on a trip.

As she felt better, Gutenkunst started playing golf again, a sport she had put on hold while she was caring for her husband. She also planned several trips around the country to visit friends she hadn't seen in years.

Before and after her husband died, Young continued to work as an architect. She took medical leave several times, but never retired. “It gave me something to focus on outside of taking care of him,” she recalls. “I compartmentalized work and then went home and was a different person. Work also became my extended family and my support network through everything.”

Some people may want to remain a caregiver, says Dr. Mayer. They may have felt such profound meaning in caring for others that they can't imagine life without it. Others may want to give back in different ways. “Some caregivers want to share their wisdom and insight,” she says. “This may lead to writing a book, making a new product, or moderating a support group.”

**BECOME A VOLUNTEER**

For some people, volunteering is a natural outgrowth of caregiving. “If there's an industry you want to work in, consider volunteering for a company in that field,” says Brown. “Or you might want to volunteer for a cause that became meaningful to you through caregiving.”

After Young's husband died, she started volunteering with the Judd Goldman Adaptive Sailing Program in Chicago, a group her husband joined after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. “Sailing gave Jack a sense of freedom, and he was happy on the water, so I wanted to give back to the program that gave him so much.”

**CELEBRATE WHAT YOU HAD**

After her husband died, Borkowski self-published *Crying Is Not an Option*, a book based on a journal she'd kept over the years of all the funny and strange things that happened while caring for her husband. “I wanted people to know how much love can grow through caregiving,” says Borkowski.

Near the one-year anniversary of her husband's death, Young and her family dressed up in Hsu's various lab coats from different institutions where he'd worked as a heart transplant surgeon. “It gave me a powerful sense of connection, knowing that he spent countless hours wearing these coats, and that his work helping others was an important part of his identity,” Young says. “He had Parkinson's disease for 18 years and it was an important part of our lives, but I also wanted to remember him as the person he was before.”

**TAKE TIME**

The year after a partner dies is filled with firsts: first birthday, first anniversary, first holidays. Facing these milestones can be difficult, which is why experts advise taking a full year to work through grief. “People may feel pressured to recover from grief, but it's a personal journey that has no specific timeline,” says Brown.

For Gutenkunst, the grieving process took longer than she expected, which is why she counsels others to take as long as they need. “You can't fix your situation overnight, so take it day by day.”

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