



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

How Are You Coping With On-going Losses?

So often, learning how to manage the difficulties encountered in caring for your family member is the focus. However, I want you to know that your quality of life is in how you are reconciling your relationship with all the losses that you have encountered in your lifetime. And you, like virtually everyone else, has encountered many losses whether it involves friends, family, career, expectations, spiritual realm... What losses have you encountered?

Losses mount up. Some people are more able than others to cope. You may wonder why this is the case. Well, there are a multitude of possibilities including: your temperament style; how you were parented; your external resources currently; your psychological resources; how well you have been able to recover from difficulties which have occurred over your lifetime; how much time between difficulties; and how “caught up” you are in the relationship with the person for whom you are caring. This results in why some people are more able than others to withstand on-going losses. How able are you currently?

So, I would like you first to reflect upon your unique situation. Just taking yourself as you are, how would you briefly describe yourself? There is nothing to change; it’s simply something valuable to know about you. You will fare better if you choose ways to cope with your losses that fit your temperament style. For example, I am rather analytical, so it behooves me to assess a situation before acting. What about you?

In looking back you can give yourself a context for your current relationship with the person for whom you are caring. This context provides you with valuable information as to how it is that you are perhaps getting triggered or feeling overwhelmed or even feeling relieved or satisfied. Knowing that you have chosen to caregive this person is important. Do you know why you have?

If there were another word for the word coping, what would it be? How can you move beyond coping and simply surviving to the concept of “being with” and acknowledging your rich life? If you are unable to do this, I recommend that you examine your history of losses and the available resources and support systems (counselling can help enormously) to help you. It is important to know that you will fare better, as will the person for whom you are caring, if you take care of yourself through examining, exploring, and recovering. Many people find themselves putting themselves on the back burner. Is this you?

Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to know that it is good idea, an excellent idea, to cope well. Period. Even though the person for whom you are caring is no longer able, you are witnessing their wide variety of feelings and behaviours as they struggle to be themselves. You need to take care of yourself well to give care to another person. It is important for you to blossom during this period and not simply cope and get worn down by the intensity or quantity of losses. How are you faring? Is it okay for you to do well when the other person isn’t?

Facing on-going losses well is an art and can be the toughest work you might ever encounter. Grieving, which this is, brings up a lot from the past. This is normal. Moving through on-going losses requires energy and focus and is invaluable.

By Allison Reeves, M.A., R.C.C.
www.allisonreevescounseling.com
(250) 927-6458

Coping with the Ongoing Losses of Caregiving

Although we expect to grieve when someone dies or is diagnosed with a terminal illness, we may not expect the recurring grief we can experience throughout the time we care for someone. Facing ongoing loss is one of the many challenges that family caregivers encounter as we adjust to changes in our family member's health. With each change, we can experience feelings of loss. Each loss requires mourning.

Depending on the specifics of your family member's illness or disability, you may be struggling with one or more of the following losses:

- Independence
- Privacy
- Hopes and dreams for the future
- Financial security
- Changes in the relationship
- Your social life
- Your job
- Your home

"I think the worst loss of all was the loss of being two people who cared for and about each other. Gone were our shared interests. Gone were our dreams for the future. Gone were the stimulating conversations and thought-provoking discussions. Gone was my sense of security and safety. Gone was the husband I had known and loved."

(Kay Marshall Strom, A Caregivers' Survival Guide, 2000.)

Your grief can manifest itself in many ways including guilt, anxiety, helplessness, irritability, anger or frustration. It is important that caregivers deal with these emotions as they occur rather than allowing the grief to build.

In addition, the chronically ill person may also have to cope with relinquishing their hopes and dreams and facing the fear of more ongoing loss. Changing roles in family, work and social situations that result from a person's illness can create additional adjustment problems for everyone involved.

Some steps for coping with caregiving related loss include:

- Recognizing and talking about your feelings. Good friends, family members, or local religious organizations can be good sources of support. Reach out to others to help reduce feelings of isolation.
- Joining a support group. Support groups provide caregivers with the opportunity to share with other caregivers and learn from one another. The Family Caregivers' Network and

other disease-specific agencies, such as the Alzheimer's Resource Center, provide support groups for family caregivers.

- Honouring your memories of what used to be while you acknowledge how things are now and what is still possible.
- Writing down your feelings. Writing or journaling is not for everyone. For individuals who enjoy writing, it can be a wonderful way to express feelings of loss and grief.
- Reading a book on coping with grief and loss.
- Making time for yourself. Do what works for you. You may want to garden, read, go for a walk or visit with others.
- Asking for help when needed to meet the demands of caregiving.

By Barbara Small, Program Development Coordinator, Family Caregivers' Network