



## **Good Grief: Finding Hope in the Necessary Losses of Being a Caregiver**

The topic for this presentation is, "Good Grief: Finding Hope in the Necessary Losses of Being a Caregiver" This presentation is on grief and loss, something that touches everyone's life in various ways. We will be talking about different types of loss that the Caregiving experience may entail and also look at the potential benefits of this role. We will explore the impact of loss on your emotions as well as provide potential skills in coping.

Caregivers' attention to grief and loss is often focused on the reactions and needs of others. Today's focus will be on you, the Caregiver, and the losses you have experienced.

Loss has many layers and involves many different situations. Not only is loss about reacting to the death of a loved one, it is also the reaction to the losses you face on a daily basis while caring for another person who may be ill or injured.

Caring for a loved one brings many different types of adjustments in the form of losses, such as the loss of a job or career, the loss of income, the loss of dreams and plans for the future, the loss of friends who drift away, the loss of a favorite hobby or vacation, the loss of freedom to do what you want when you want to, and sometimes the loss of your own health and vitality.

Judith Viorst wrote a book titled, "Necessary Losses" which talks about the losses we all experience throughout our life. She sees these losses as a necessary part of growing up and learning from life lessons. The following quote from her book captures what we are hoping to present to you today, she says "Losses are a part of life...and these losses are necessary, because we grow by losing, and leaving, and letting go."

While loss is a part of life, it is acknowledging them, and grieving them that helps you grow. Have you recognized the losses you have experienced as a result of the Veterans illness and your role as Caregiver?

Do you feel burdened or blue with all you have had to give or give up as a result of your caregiving? Have you acknowledged the demands of your private caregiving life? Do you feel alone in your struggles, that no one really sees or understands how



illness and caregiving demands have impacted you? Do you feel like you are going it alone?

When loved ones are ill, Caregivers often are stepping up to do what it takes and may march on unrecognized as if it is just part of everyday life. To be successful as a Caregiver you have made many changes and adjustments to your life. You may never have considered that some of the adjustments you have had to make are considered a loss.

The reason why this is important to reflect on is that each loss has had an impact on you as a person. Sometimes this impact is for the better and sometimes for the worse. It is important that you honor and acknowledge the impact so you can deal with your feelings and grow from the loss.

While it is important to recognize what has been lost, it is also important to consider what you have gained or learned from this experience. If you do acknowledge and learn from your losses, they may also bring significant benefits. Let's consider some of the losses that Caregivers may experience and also some potential benefits that may have resulted from this experience.

One area that many Caregivers experience loss, is in the area of work or career. You are not alone if you have had to make difficult decisions such as cutting back hours at work, changing jobs for more flexibility but fewer rewards, ending a career, or taking early retirement.

Work life may contribute many positives to your life. You may have had work related dreams, aspirations, and goals, felt part of a team. Your work may have highlighted your talents and skills. It may have reinforced your identity and self-esteem or given you a sense of purpose. Consider how your job or work life has impacted you as a person and what its loss has meant to you.

Has it brought you satisfaction? Did you find joy or pride in working on particular projects or doing certain tasks? Were you part of a team where you had camaraderie and support from co-workers? The absence of your professional work has an impact on your identity and this loss is important to recognize and honor.

While you may have experienced the loss of your professional or work life identity, take a few moments now to consider what benefits you may have found in your role as a Caregiver. Have you discovered that you are a stronger person than you ever



thought you could be? What new skills have you learned? What new challenges have you faced and grown from as a result? Do you ever sit back and reflect on what you, as one individual, are able to accomplish in any given day? Take a moment and recognize the positive benefits you see as a result of becoming a Caregiver.

Along with the stress of having to change or end a job, these changes may result in facing a loss of income and the challenges of managing a tighter income. Has loss of employment resulted in loss of medical insurance? Have medical expenses become burdensome? Have you had to hire help to care for your home or to supplement caregiving?

The family Caregiver often faces the difficult decision of whether to give up a job to stay home or pay the costs of hiring help. Are the expenses you were able to manage in the past while working, becoming a strain? Is caring for beloved pets, keeping up household expenses, or providing for your family become an endless juggling act?

Caregivers may find themselves having to use precious savings, take out a loan or increase their credit card debt, cut back on spending for day-to-day needs, cut back on health and dental care, eliminate leisure activities, or cancel travel plans.

This loss of income can leave you feeling worried, insecure, and missing the extra comforts that your previous income may have afforded. How has your financial situation changed? What financial losses are you grieving?

While these challenges are difficult let's consider how the change in your financial situation provided some unexpected benefits? Have you come up with some creative ways of managing money? Do you ever reflect with pride on your financial management skills? Have you learned to prioritize what is necessary to spend money on rather than buying what you have always bought? Have you found ways to simplify your life and return to or develop some of the simple pleasures that can provide comfort? While these losses are difficult, they are not without opportunity for positive growth.

Another area of loss that you may be recognizing is related to your relationship with the Veteran or with others. Whether you are the Veteran's spouse, child, sibling, grandchild, or friend, this change is important. You may find that due to the Veteran's physical or emotional changes, the relationship you once had has changed and there may be sadness, resentment, or longing for how it used to be.



You may find that the Veteran has become more introverted or unwilling to share thoughts or feelings so that you no longer know what he/she is thinking or feeling. You may find that the Veteran has bouts of explosive anger that frightens or confuses you.

Sometimes the Veteran's changes effect social relationships which may also cause a loss for you. The Veteran may not be comfortable going out in public or may have physical challenges that make it difficult to leave home. This situation can lead to the Caregiver feeling very isolated and may lead to the loss of friendships.

There may be a period of time that friends or acquaintances rally around you and offer support but over time those offers may dwindle, leaving you feeling alone and sometimes resentful. You may find that you can't go out for dinner or to a movie, to visit relatives or friends out of the area. You may start feeling that every day revolves around the Veteran's needs. Does it make you wonder who is thinking of you and what you are going through? These changes or losses in relationship has a painful and bitter sting and deserves recognition and attention.

Once this loss is recognized it is important to remember all relationships change over time. We are always faced with the loss of how it used to be and the opportunity to develop a new connection. If you are able to adapt to the change, there are potential benefits both for your own growth as well as for your relationships to grow.

Let us consider what you may have gained by being there to support your Veteran and what have you gained from letting go and adapting to the inevitable changes in relationships?

Maybe the Veteran had never relied on you in this way before and you find a new closeness or tenderness between you that your compassion and care has afforded the relationship. Maybe there are qualities in you that have grown as a result of the change in your relationship. Have you learned to make decisions or taken charge in ways you hadn't ever before? Have you seen your capacity for compassion, patience, and endurance and felt proud of who you are and how you have grown? Have you found new ways to connect with others? Learning to adapt and grow from your relationships and expanding your connections to others is a skill that will keep you resilient and engaged in living.

Another area of possible loss to consider are changes to your life goals, family vacation plans, dreams of relaxation and fun at retirement, or giving up enjoyable hobbies. This type of loss may occur as a result of the Veteran's health and functioning



or changes in income or resources, or any number of needed alterations in your lifestyle.

Having to let go of plans, goals, or the dreams you had for the future are significant losses to grieve. In order to move forward, there is the need to both recognize the loss but also explore how to readjust and redefine what you are planning or looking forward to.

Moving forward may require that you reflect on what is really important to you and what isn't so important. This can be an opportunity to reflect on your values, your beliefs, or your faith. This can also be an opportunity to explore and open your mind to new possibilities. Sometimes you actually may find that this is an opportunity to consider options and interests that you never considered before.

Consider the ways you have had to let go of future plans or goals. Has this loss caused you to think more about what really matters? Are there unexpected gifts that you have found as a result?

The loss of your physical well-being is a common loss that you may grapple with as a Caregiver given the physical and emotional demands placed upon you every day. The very nature of focusing your attention on another can make it more challenging to be mindful of your own physical needs.

Caregiving can be emotionally stressful and may require more physical activity than you are used to which can take a toll on your physical health. Have you noticed any increase in your physical ailments? Have your days dragged on because of poor or interrupted sleep at night? When a person does not get enough rest, it can take a toll on the ability to think, maintain patience, self-composure, and ultimately impacts physical health. If the Veteran also requires significant emotional support, it can be particularly challenging to ride the ups and downs of mood swings or angry outbursts while maintaining your own composure and not reacting in kind.

Caregiving can drain both your physical and emotional energy, leaving you with little energy for yourself. Have you forgotten to make time for the things that you enjoy or that help you care for yourself?

While the emotional and physical demands of Caregiving are a real and recognizable loss for you as the Caregiver, there are also potential gains from your devotion to the Veteran. As a Caregiver have you become more acutely sensitive to the



physical and emotional struggles that others deal with? This sensitivity may make you aware and more grateful for the health that you enjoy and may even help you see the value in taking good care of yourself.

Have you found that you have greater endurance, patience, gratitude or flexibility? This patience may be evident when you hold back your own reactions or outbursts knowing that it will only contribute to the situation becoming more tense. Has your level of compassion and understanding deepened with the situations you face daily? Have you become aware of the wisdom that you have gained from your challenges? You bring this wisdom and compassion to your own life and those around you benefit from it.

We have just reviewed five potential areas where a Caregiver may experience loss: job, finances, relationships, life goals, and physical and emotional health. Working through your losses and honoring these losses allows you to be freed up to engage and be present to what life has to offer you in the here and now. Let's consider some healthy coping skills that will keep you engaged despite your losses?

First, paying attention to your feelings is the first step to healthy coping. Paying attention to your feelings means that you recognize and honor your feelings and losses. Taking care of yourself means acknowledging all of your feelings both the painful and the pleasurable feelings. Taking care means considering all that you have lost and let go of, as well as what you gain from your caregiving duties. Give yourself permission to feel and care for yourself.

Once you have acknowledged and honored your feelings and losses you can seek further strategies to help you cope. One positive way to foster healthy coping with stressful situations is to live in the moment.

Affirmations are one way to live in the moment. Affirmations can help you keep your perspective and can help bolster your positive outlook. Reading them or writing them down can provide a soothing focus when in the moment you are struggling. Affirmations such as: "I am choosing to be patient, and calm," "I am accepting what is," "I am grateful for all that I have received," may provide composure and balance.

Mindfulness is another method of living in the moment. You may practice mindfulness when you pause and bring your full attention and acceptance to the moment, whether focusing on your breathing, a picture, or the sounds of nature. You





can bring a clearer perspective, a renewed and a calming presence to the day, simply by bringing your full attention to your breathing or to what is happening in the moment.

Another strategy of coping might be to express gratitude once a day. If you focus on what you are grateful for, it increases that positive energy and helps you to keep perspective. This is especially helpful to do just before you go to sleep so your mood is calm and you end your day on a positive note.

Activities such as reading a book or listening to music, or engaging in a hobby can transform your stress, engage your thoughts and brighten your mood.

Being connected to others in any way available to you is a powerful coping mechanism. Maybe consider reducing isolation as you did today by joining a telephone on-line or in-person support group. Stay in touch with friends by phone, letters, email, or Skype. Reach out to those people that may not realize or have forgotten how hard it is for you to care for your loved one. Push yourself to take the risk of reaching out.

Connect with your animals. Take your dog for a walk. Talk to your pet in a soothing voice telling them your woes. Play with your pet so that you see the joy in their body.

Connect to interests or community activities that you enjoy as a means of coping. Consider a visit to a museum or spark your curiosity, with a visit to the library. Libraries are a free source for books, DVDs, music, and magazines.

Another positive coping tip is to get rest! Going to bed tired may make it easier to fall asleep. If you are not tired, get up and do something until you are tired and make your sleep time count.

Consider if it would be possible for you to take a short vacation to get some rest. Get time off your caregiving duties either by using respite available from the VA or asking a friend or family member to stay with the Veteran.

If you can't make those things happen, Caregivers can take an "inner" vacation wherever they are. Plan and carry out a "stay-cation" at home. Have a picnic in the living room. Spend time playing some games like cards or a favorite board game. Buy bubble bath for the bathtub "spa."

Think about a special place that brings you joy. Maybe try using relaxation or meditation tapes to let your mind and body enter a peaceful state.



Another coping tip is to vent. Airing your struggles and needs can bring needed relief whether you write them in a journal or share them with another. Give yourself time and opportunity to release your feelings, recognize feeling angry or taking the time to have a good cry.

Another tip is to remember your spiritual care. No matter what your religious beliefs, it is important to honor your values, to think about what your beliefs are, and to take a few moments each day to pray, or meditate, or sit in silence.

Ask others for help. Many people are willing to offer help but do not know what they can do. Write a specific list of tasks or duties that friends or family members can choose from to help. You deserve a break and relief from the day to day demands.

Consider going to counseling. Sometimes the losses add up. Seeking professional help from your doctor, a counselor or religious leader can help you process the impact and avoid the consequences of burnout.

Seek out information from reliable sources on how to live positively with the disease or injury. There are local and national resources available to offer information and support.

An additional positive coping tip is to make a plan and set goals for you. Setting goals can reinforce that you are a priority, that your goals matter and can provide you with some sense of control over the choices that you are making every day.

Finally, consider exercise. This is a great way to manage the challenges that you are coping with. Setting aside time even 10-15 minutes a day to exercise will help your body and lift your spirits. Make time to walk, stretch, dance, bike, and move.

There are so many ways you can look to for relief; your physical body, to others, to nature, to your goals, and beliefs to cope with the transitions and inevitable losses that occur.

We have identified some potential losses and encouraged you to pay attention and to honor the losses you have experienced due to your Caregiver duties, changing roles, and changes in your daily life.

We hope you have become aware of why acknowledging these losses is important to your emotional and physical health. We also hope that you attend to these losses, attend to yourself, and utilize these coping strategies and in doing so find this





grief will become a good grief. This challenge once faced will support your growth, wellbeing and ongoing resilience. Before we end this presentation, we would like to spend a few moments of calm reflection on the losses that you carry with you.

To begin this meditation, sit comfortably upright.

Feel your body against the chair as it supports you.

Uncross your legs and place your feet on the floor, bringing your awareness to the feel of your feet being grounded.

Relax your shoulders, resting your hands comfortably in your lap, or on your thighs.

To remove visual distractions, you may close your eyes.

Relax the jaw if it is clenched and close your mouth. You may find it helpful to rest your tongue by lightly having it touch the roof of your mouth.

Breathe in through your nose, unless for some reason you aren't able.

Settle in to this position of support and openness.

Start by taking a deep cleansing breath, deep into your belly. Observe your belly rising, ribs expanding, and then exhale slowly.

Again, a cleansing breath, in deeply, and exhale slowly.

Now, without trying to control your breath in any way, allow it to find its natural rhythm and depth.

Bring your attention simply to the rise and fall of your breath.

You don't have to do anything special, just observe the natural movement.

Feel the air coming into your nose, your lungs expanding, your belly rising, the gentle pause, and exhale.

You don't have to control your breathing in any way.

You have given attention to the losses you have experienced today and may find that thoughts and feelings about your losses will rise to the surface of your attention.

What losses are heavy on your heart?



What feelings surface about these losses?

What do you notice is there; anger, sadness, longing, despair? What surfaces to your awareness?

Observe these feelings with kindness and compassion.

Let these feelings move freely without clinging to them or trying to make them go away.

It is OK to just let them be, observing them without judgement.

They won't last forever if you can just let them be.

Your losses are a reflection of what you care deeply about.

Whether your loss is someone that you love, work you have given up, changes in your health or life changes; change and loss can be painful.

Accepting the loss, the changes, and the feelings involved, will release the pain and help you move forward.

Resisting the feelings and resisting the reality of the loss keeps you suffering.

Honor the investment you have made

Honor who you have loved and lost.

Honor the investment you have given to these cherished losses.

Nothing can diminish the loving investment you have made.

Nothing can diminish what your heart has freely given.

Cherish all that you have given your heart to.

Observe and reflect on the gifts of your heart.

Free the feelings of loss and make room for your heart to open again.

Breathe deeply into your belly and find healing.

Let your breath soothe and heal your spirit.



Now as you settle into the calm of your breath remember there is healing in this practice of being still, breathing deeply, and observing your thoughts and feelings with kindness and acceptance. This is a practice you can return to for comfort and calm.

As we end this time together you can open your eyes and begin to become aware of your surroundings. Slowly allow your body to stretch and become more alert.

Remember your losses with loving kindness and know that you can return to this place of calm whenever you decide to turn your attention to the present moment with kindness and compassion.