# Rebuilding life after caring

*A gentle resource for former carers*

When a long or intensive caring role changes or ends, life may not simply return to what it was before. Caring can have shaped your days, relationships, routines, finances, identity and sense of purpose for months or years, and the transition out of that role can bring grief, relief, exhaustion, uncertainty and many other feelings at the same time. There is no single timetable for rebuilding and no requirement to know immediately what comes next.

This resource grew from the Carer Gateway caregiver education program Supporting You, Supporting Others – Beyond Death and Back into Life, delivered by Preparing the Way in partnership with Carer Gateway. It is intended as a gentle starting point rather than another list of things you must achieve.

## Understanding what you may be going through

Grief after caring is about more than sadness. Former carers may experience a loss of identity or purpose, deep fatigue after a long period of vigilance, guilt or regret about decisions made during caring, relief that the intensity has ended, social isolation because life had become centred around the caring role, or difficulty adjusting to a home and calendar that suddenly feel very different. Carer Gateway notes that physical and emotional exhaustion can sometimes catch up with people after caring ends, and that rebuilding may involve reconnecting with relationships, interests, community, learning or work when the time feels right.

You may find yourself asking who you are now that you are no longer organising each day around someone else's needs. That question does not need an immediate answer. Identity can take time to expand again after a long period of caring.

## Allow time to rest, reflect and recover

Many carers have spent a long time operating with high levels of responsibility, interrupted sleep and constant attention to another person's needs. When that responsibility reduces or stops, the body and mind may need time to catch up. Rest can be part of rebuilding rather than something you need to finish before rebuilding begins.

- Keep routines gentle and realistic, particularly in the early weeks and months.
- Give attention to sleep, food, movement, medical and dental care, and appointments you may have postponed while caring.
- Allow periods when you do very little without treating that time as wasted.
- If difficult feelings are persistent or overwhelming, consider talking with a counsellor, grief practitioner, GP or another trusted support person.

## Reconnect with people and community

A person's social world often becomes smaller during long term caring. Invitations may have been declined, friendships may have become harder to maintain, and activities that once brought connection may have fallen away. Reconnection does not have to mean suddenly becoming busy again; it can begin with one person, one coffee, one phone call, one familiar group or one place where you feel comfortable.

It can also help to connect with people who understand caring and grief from the inside. Carer Gateway offers counselling, coaching and peer support, and there are grief organisations and community groups across Australia that can provide additional connection.

## Reclaim life gently

As energy and curiosity begin to return, it may be useful to notice what brings you meaning or sparks even a small amount of interest. This is not about replacing the person you cared for or leaving the past behind. It is about gradually allowing your own life to have space again.

- Return to an interest that was put aside during caring, such as gardening, reading, music, craft, writing or being outdoors.
- Try a short course, community class or other form of learning simply because something interests you.
- Consider volunteering when and if it feels nourishing rather than obligatory.
- Explore a gradual return to paid work or study if that is part of what you want for yourself.
- Take small breaks or day trips, especially to places that help you reconnect with nature, pleasure or a sense of freedom.
- Make room for new interests without feeling that every activity needs to become a goal or a new responsibility.

## Honour what caring has meant

Caring may have been one of the hardest, most loving, most complicated or most significant periods of your life, and it may have been several of those things at once. Rebuilding does not require you to discard that part of yourself. Some people find it helpful to record stories, create a memory book, write about the experience, share what they have learned with other carers, or become involved in community work that gives meaning to what they have lived through. Others prefer privacy and distance. There is no right way to honour the caring years.

## Notice the practical changes too

The end of a caring role can bring immediate practical changes as well as emotional ones. Income support may change, household finances may need to be reconsidered, housing arrangements can alter, and there may be legal or administrative responsibilities after a death. Getting practical advice early can sometimes reduce the burden while you are also grieving and adjusting.

## 24 gentle ways to care for yourself

The original Carer Gateway Round 2 workbook included a self care list adapted from a CaringBridge caregiver resource. The ideas below retain the spirit of that material while being reframed for life after caring. They are possibilities to choose from, not another checklist you are expected to complete.

- Let guilt soften where you can, including guilt about feeling relief.
- Stay connected with a carer, former carer or grief support group.
- Stretch, breathe and notice what your body needs.
- Make room for laughter and moments of lightness without feeling disloyal.
- Talk with another person regularly, particularly when you are feeling isolated.
- Rest when you are tired rather than automatically pushing through.

- Return some attention to food and nutrition after months or years of putting another person's needs first.
- Ask for practical help while you are adjusting; support does not have to stop because caring has stopped.
- Practise saying no when something is more than you have capacity for.
- If you are working, talk with your workplace about flexibility while you are grieving and readjusting.
- Spend time with people with whom you can be yourself rather than needing to be 'the strong one'.
- Return to spiritual, cultural or reflective practices that have meaning for you.
- Notice things you are grateful for without using gratitude to silence grief or difficult feelings.
- Move your body in ways that feel manageable and supportive.
- Notice whether caffeine, alcohol or other habits are helping or making sleep and anxiety harder.
- Listen to music that comforts, energises or allows emotion to move.
- Give yourself small pleasures without needing to earn them.
- Return to hobbies or interests that once felt like part of you.
- Spend time with animals if that is something that brings you comfort.
- Read for pleasure, learning or companionship.
- Use compassionate words with yourself, particularly when self criticism appears.
- Seek professional support if grief, anxiety, depression or exhaustion are becoming difficult to manage alone.
- Try not to turn self care into another performance measure or demanding to do list.
- Be patient and kind with the person you are becoming after caring.

## Useful Australian support and further reading

- Carer Gateway – Life after caring
- Carer Gateway – Death and grieving
- Carer Gateway – 1800 422 737
- Carers Australia – Palliative care and end of life care
- Preparing the Way

## A final thought

Rebuilding is rarely linear. Some days may bring energy and curiosity and others may bring tiredness, grief or a longing for the familiar rhythm of caring, even when that rhythm was exhausting. You do not need to rush into a new identity or fill every newly empty space. The aim is not to 'move on' from the person or the years of caring, but to gradually make room for your own needs, relationships, interests and future again.

**You have got this, and we have got you.**

## Source acknowledgement

This resource has been adapted and expanded from the “Rebuilding and Renewing” and “24 Ways to Care for Yourself” sections of the Carer Gateway Caregiver Training Round 2 workbook, Supporting You, Supporting Others – Beyond Death and Back into Life, developed and delivered by Preparing the Way in partnership with Carer Gateway. The original workbook

included material and links from Carer Gateway, Carers Australia and CaringBridge. This standalone version has been rewritten for broader public use and updated against current publicly available Australian carer information.

- Carer Gateway, “Life after caring”
- Carer Gateway, “Death and grieving”
- Carers Australia, “Palliative care and end of life care”
- CaringBridge, caregiver self care resources

Prepared by Preparing the Way. This resource is educational and supportive in nature and is not a substitute for medical, psychological, legal or financial advice.