

# Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda:



Two Pages

## *Dealing With Grief and Guilt After a Loved One Passes*

On Jan. 23, 2009, I watched my mother take her final breath. After six-and-a-half years of suffering, my mother no longer was in pain, and her body no longer was betraying her. That moment was one of the most peaceful in my life. Only the period that followed was full of inner turmoil.

*When you become a caregiver*, the role becomes part of your identity. It is like becoming a mother: You suddenly are responsible for a life other than your own -- ensuring compliance with medication regimens, scheduling and attending doctor appointments, preparing meals, and so on. So what do you do when your Mama role comes to an end?

The end of my caregiving journey was the beginning of a new journey -- one of grieving, healing, and trying to find what my "new normal" would be. What would my life be like without an adrenaline rush whenever the phone rang after 6:00 p.m.? What would it be like without Mom -- no mother to call when I need "Mom," and no mother needing me? Would I be okay without being needed?

This identity crisis was quickly followed by "what-ifs" and "should-haves": What if I had done a better job at fill-in-the-blank? *What if we had chosen a different treatment option?* I should have let her have that grilled cheese sandwich! I should have taken her to that movie! I should have been a better kid when I was five years old! The truth is, I did the best job I knew how, giving my mother 110 percent of my effort, time, and attention. I simply was torturing myself with 20/20 hindsight.

This Jan. 23, it will be four years since Mom passed away. Not a day goes by without my thinking about her. With each passing day, however, the *ability to cope gets a little bit easier*. The void in my heart fills with memories of life and love, not loss; the pit in my stomach aches less; and my outlook on the future improves. My experience most certainly has defined me. I did not, however let it destroy me. Instead, I chose to draw from it as a way of bringing comfort and guidance to those who are now in some stage of the *journey* I began a decade ago. It is to these individuals, as well as to my younger self, that I have this to say about losing your loved one:

### *1. Take time away.*

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Four weeks after Mom passed away, my dad, brother and I purchased one-way tickets to Bangkok, Thailand, with the intention of relaxing, reflecting, *working through our pain as a team*, and returning home with a sense of excitement about life. I look back now and understand just how important that down-time was for our family. Mom had been sick for the better part of a decade, and as a result, we had been in fight-or-flight mode the entire time, giving our parasympathetic nervous systems little or no rest. I know that not everyone can leave work, pack

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up their lives for an undisclosed amount of time, and take off to a tropical destination. Even a weekend or week away will do your mind and body some good. So whatever you are able to pull off, be sure to give yourself the opportunity to retreat and check out.

### ***2. Allow yourself the grieving and processing time.***

Any wound, physical or emotional, requires time to heal. Everyone grieves differently, but as a general rule, you will have good days and not-so-good days. Give yourself permission to cry when you feel like crying; excuse yourself from *situations that trigger you*; and simply do not answer the phone, if you are not up for yet another heart-to-heart with yet another concerned individual. This time is yours.

### ***3. Do not make any drastic decisions.***

Here is the best piece of advice I received, from a friend who had lost her mother when she was my age: "Give yourself two years. Something changed for me at that time. My brain fog cleared, the hurt subsided, and I felt better about making changes." While the two-year mark turned out to be spot-on for me, it may not be the transformation landmark for everyone. Regardless, take the time to do some healing before deciding to send all your loved one's possessions to a thrift store or sell your home and move to a tropical island (as I wanted to do).

### ***4. Life goes on.***

Following my mother's death, I was convinced that there was absolutely, positively no way that life could go on. In my opinion, the world tilted on its axis that Jan. 23, 2009. But as much I felt that the world had come to a screeching halt for all of humanity, life in fact continued on normally for everyone but my family. And so it will be with you. Behold the "thirty day" rule: The first 30 days after a loss or catastrophe, the phone may ring, the mail box may be full of cards, and the refrigerator may be stocked full of tuna casserole from your hundred closest friends and neighbors. Very quickly though, life will move on for those not directly involved. At that time, begin seeking help from those who bring you comfort on a regular basis -- be it a sibling, best friend, or extended family member. If your confidante happens to be the loved one who died, be sure to find a *support group or therapist who can help you transition*.

### ***5. Have compassion for yourself.***

It is important to always remember that you became a caregiver because you care. You stepped up, took charge, and gave the situation your all. The outcome may not have been the outcome you had hoped for, bargained for, or wished for on a shooting star, but it is your new reality. Cut yourself some slack; do not muddle over the shoulda-coulda-wouldas. Be kind to yourself; forgive yourself for anything you feel you could have done better; and know the person you cared for was loved and respected throughout the process. *In loving memory of Cindy Zellick.*