

Finding New Purpose

Category: Alone

written by Pamela Adelstein | June 19, 2023

Having a purpose in life is as critical to one's well-being as food and shelter. I've learned, over my 25 years of doctoring, that a sense of purpose both helps us develop our identity—our sense of self—and connects us to something *greater* than ourselves.

An elderly patient of mine began volunteering as a mentor to an adult with disabilities. Her chronic pain and depression improved, and she radiated joy at her medical visits. Another patient volunteered at multiple food banks. She never missed a day, and her knowledge became increasingly critical to the operations' smooth functioning. I've also seen younger patients return to school or start a business and similarly have their passion for life reignited. Sharing my patients' excitement about new ventures that sustain them brings me great delight. It's wonderful to be happy for someone else's joy.

Other patients of mine, however, have seen their sense of purpose slip away. Perhaps they faced a job layoff. Or financial difficulties that forced them to defer schooling. Or, especially tragically, the loss of a loved one for whom they were the primary caregiver. Many patients become a family member's main caregiver, and their own life is subsumed by this task. The caregiver's time is no longer their own. They may be unable to keep up with friendships or hobbies. Their entire existence revolves around caring for their family member. So when their loved one dies, an enormous chasm of loneliness threatens to swallow them up. Part of healing from their grief involves finding a new purpose and sense of self. For some people, this happens relatively swiftly. For others, it takes years.

I am on the cusp of a new phase of life myself, as an empty-nester. My younger child just graduated from high school and will be moving out of state to attend college this fall. Intellectually, I know new opportunities await. Yet a persistent sadness is lodged deep inside my chest; I will miss my child tremendously.

I have been realizing that my time parenting school-age children is at an end. My children are now adults; they still need me, but in a different way. Hopefully, my children will thrive as individuals and grow in their independence. Yet in a parallel process I, and I alone, must redefine myself and integrate that redefinition into *my* purpose.

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