

“In Sickness and in Health”—When Your Spouse Is Ill

by Sue Fox McGovern

When Vivian’s husband, Tim, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, she flew into high gear. She spent hours scouring the internet for information. She stayed strong for her two young children and her husband of eight years. But she also experienced frustration and stress when dealing with doctors and the unknown.

Vivian and I attend the same Bible study in suburban Chicago, and she says her faith in God and spending time in prayer pulled her through this difficult period. As she drew closer to God, she also fell more deeply in love with her husband and wanted to give him as much of herself as possible.

Like Vivian and Tim, some couples grow stronger and even experience new levels of love and understanding when confronted with illness. But oftentimes this isn’t the case. Anger and fear can enter a couple’s relationship and steer it off course.

Working your way through

All of us will become sick at one time or another. Our relationships with others automatically change when we need them to help us through the day. So what happens when a spouse falls ill? How can we best serve him or her, and take care of ourselves as well?

Accepting your spouse’s illness is not easy, and will take time. You may feel resentful, angry, and depressed. It may help to remember that chances are your spouse is experiencing these emotions even more deeply. Bereavement experts say it’s OK to feel frustrated and upset, and add that you shouldn’t berate yourself for feeling this way.

Communication and planning are key early on. Your marriage may become stronger by the love and care you offer each other. Here are some suggestions for traveling down this road together.

Get information.

When illness enters your spouse’s life, acknowledge it and get familiar with it. Read about it and ask medical experts questions. Denying it or being fearful won’t erase its existence; neither will doing so benefit your loved one.

Try to accept that serious illness disrupts a person’s sense of well-being and emotional state. If your spouse is able to open up, listen quietly and calmly. If she tells you about feeling frightened and anxious, tell her that you understand and are sympathetic. It’s best to avoid saying something like, “Oh, I’m sure you’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.” Such a response may cause the sick person to withdraw and start drifting away.

Everyone’s Guide to Cancer Therapy offers a glimpse into what may be going on inside your ill spouse’s head and what he or she may really need from you: “I’ve noticed that when I tell you I’m scared, you tell me not to worry. I am thinking you say that because you care for me and you don’t want me to worry.

But at those times when I tell you how worried I am, what would help me most is a hug and to hear you say how much you love me and that you worry sometimes, too.”

Getting good information from books, the internet, and those who have already been through what you’re facing can shed light on you and your spouse’s situation.

Don’t isolate yourself.

Making an effort to get out of the house to visit with others or simply to enjoy the beauty of the season can do wonders. Once you’re outside, you could decide to walk to a friend’s house or to the park instead of driving there. We all need exercise, and when you’re under stress, it’s more important than ever.

During a long-term illness, caregivers need to take breaks or they will begin to suffer emotionally and physically. Speaking with those who are well can offer a refreshing view. Caregiver Jim says that he maintains a close relationship with members of his church and also meets with friends for morning coffee to engage his mind intellectually. He adds that such actions make him feel better and help reduce stress and worry. Try to let others in to help and support you. Quite often family members and friends are waiting and hoping to be invited to visit or bring over a meal.

“Think as positively about life as you possibly can,” Jim says. “Thinking positively and giving compliments to people when it’s appropriate can make others feel good, and you in turn can feel good. Get people to smile and it will make you smile—and that’s helpful.” Jim also makes room for the daily newspaper so he can keep up with community and national events. Reading can help prevent your world from closing in on you.

For Vivian, the time of illness and crisis turned into a unique opportunity to quietly minister to others going through the rare form of cancer that struck her husband. And she also connected to people via a website called CaringBridge, which provided her with a link to others who also were going through difficult times and enabled her to email family members with updates on her husband’s progress. She says she would have been worn out trying to call relatives with constant progress reports. Sometimes all it takes is keeping an ear open for opportunities or resources and then assessing whether or not they could benefit you in your situation.

Accept your spouse’s love.

Try not to deny your spouse’s illness, and let your sick husband or wife nurture you. My neighbor Gloria told me recently that when her husband was suffering from cancer, he could foresee his condition getting worse, and showered Gloria with love. He wrote down instructions for her regarding investments, banking, and other household matters. He even said to Gloria that if he were to die, “Make sure you get lawn service.”

“The phrase, ‘Till death do us part’ is powerful and true,” Gloria says. She stood by her husband till the end and says that she’ll never know why he had to die at 66, but that his death was the end of a good life. What he left behind was a symbol of strength and commitment summed up in love.

Jim also accepted his dying wife's love. He believes in focusing on good memories when your spouse's illness gets serious. When your loved one is sick, he suggests trying to remember the joyful times you have shared. He recalls thinking about kissing his wife good night, telling her that he loved her, and how she'd reciprocate.

Talk to God.

Vivian has a medical background and believes that each of us has to be our own health advocate. She prays a lot and says that God filled her with much peace during her husband's ordeal. "I could get up every morning and praise God," Vivian says. "It was huge." Praying to God is also important to Jim, especially in prayers of his own making. "Talking to God in my own words," he says, "has been extremely helpful."

Gloria, too, spent a lot of time in prayer. She said she began the grieving process at the beginning of her husband's six-month diagnosis. She and her husband shared a strong spirituality and accepted and appreciated support from their church. She adds that it's OK to be angry and even bargain with God.

Take Heart

My friend's father, Jim, says that when he got married, he took his marriage vows very seriously; when his wife became ill, taking care of her was part of his responsibility. Even when he got tired of climbing the stairs to assist and feed his wife, he continued to care for her. And day after day, through close contact with her, he says that he felt blessed as he witnessed his wife's strong faith and the way she always tried to make things easier for those around her.

While no one is saying that illness is easy to deal with, you don't have to feel like you and your spouse are victims—we will all fall ill or have to take care of a loved one at some time. If you are willing to communicate and remain connected to others while caring for your ill spouse, your journey together can be a healing experience for your relationship and an opportunity to grow in love, no matter what the outcome of the illness.

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