

Chronic Illnesses and Marriages

Nina Chen, Ph.D., CFLE
Human Development Specialist

When a chronic illness strikes, there is a challenge in marriages. Research has shown that a chronic illness can have big impacts on couple relationships. Some studies found that a chronic illness can make some marriages stronger and have a new meaning to life and a closer relationship. On the contrary, a chronic illness may tear a marriage apart. A study by Dr. Alan Booth and Dr. David Johnson at the University of Nebraska found a decline in marital satisfaction might be caused by the reduced opportunity to share in activities, the afflicted spouses may be moodier, angrier, and more prone to hurt feelings after becoming ill, and the drain on the couple's resources. Partner/caregivers may suffer from increased anxiety, depression, physical and emotional distress, economic hardships, and workload which can have negative impacts on the quality of life.

Another study of men with prostate cancer by Dr. Mark Litwin of UCLA found that when a man has cancer, it is linked to better survival and quality of life regardless of the quality of the relationship. But when a woman has cancer, the quality of life may matter more since men have a tendency not to be aware of their partner's feelings and sharing emotions. One study by Israeli researchers found that when husbands were emotionally distant, their wives who had breast cancer suffered more distress. When the wife gets cancer, both partners have to adapt. Empathy with each other's feelings can help make the couple relationship stronger. Men may have to listen and express feelings more. Women may also have to turn to support from friends and relatives.

As a partner/caregiver, your future might not look the way you would hope. Couples may feel angry, fearful, guilty, or worried about finances, the kids, sex life, or future. Couples may be in denial, insisting that everything's really just fine, or grieving over all you have lost.

Managing the way an illness affects your marriage is very important. The partner/caregiver has to learn how to cope with many feelings and realities. Recognizing reality is the first step in being a resourceful couple. Most illnesses are processes that may go on and on. During the process, couples will need different things at different times. Learning all you can about the illness and joining or forming a support group can be beneficial.

It is important to be supportive and honest with each other. Communicating about inner experiences is a key and can set the tone for a lasting relationship. Couples who demonstrate responsibility, adaptation, compassion, encouragement, support, and flexibility can build stronger, closer marriages despite the presence of illness.

References:

Alan Booth and David Johnson, (Feb. 1994). Declining health and marital quality, Journal of Marriage and the Family, Vol. 56, No 1, pp. 218-223.

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