



IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH?

Illness can take a toll on a relationship, but there are ways to keep your bond strong.

BY KRISTINA GRISH

FOR THE PAST two years, I've been clawing my way back from a difficult illness and a relationship's end—an upsetting one-two punch that's become increasingly linked for many women. As my story goes, in November 2019, I underwent a hysterectomy and soon after faced a Lyme disease relapse and exposure to a chemical in my home. My immune and nervous systems became completely unhinged. Because of their extreme sensitivity, I didn't touch other people and constantly wiped down surfaces to avoid triggering a reaction.

I was in hell, 24/7, with little to no relief. The best we could do, doctors said, was try different medications, supplements, and diets to calm things down. I was advised to temporarily move into an apartment—separate from my husband and son—since the air in my house made me feel worse. I lived in a terrifying and isolating bubble, but I saw my two favorite guys as often as I could. Within six months, I started to see real progress.

Nonetheless, it was just as I was showing improvement that my husband of 12 years told me he'd filed for divorce. In so many words, he said that my illness had taken too much of a toll. For the life of me, I did not see this coming. I thought we were facing a crisis together and would pull through as a team. Nope. He was done.

Though my story is painful, its premise is not unique. Studies show that, for heterosexual couples, a wife's chronic illness is associated with an increased risk that the marriage will end in divorce. Given that the National Health Council estimated that by 2020, 157 million Americans will have been affected by a chronic health condition, and 81 million will have multiple conditions, too many couples are at risk of a breakdown. What's more, a study published in 2009 in the journal *Cancer* found that married women diagnosed with serious medical illnesses were more likely than men with a similar diagnosis to be divorced or separated; the

divorce rate was almost 21 percent for seriously ill women and less than 3 percent for men.

“Many relationships are still organized so that the woman is the primary caregiver and nurturer, who’s also mainly in charge of managing the household,” says Vikki Stark, MSW, a Montreal-based marriage and family therapist and author of *Runaway Husbands: The Abandoned Wife’s Guide to Recovery and Renewal*. “When she becomes ill, the balance is thrown off, and many men are not comfortable in their new roles.” She adds that a spouse will then get upset at his sick partner, because “she changed the paradigm, and he didn’t have a say in the matter. It’s an irrational and subconscious response to the wife’s illness.” Further, an acute or ongoing illness affects every topic that couples fight about—financial, practical, emotional, sexual—during the best of times, says Jane Greer, PhD, a New York-based marriage and family therapist and author of *What About Me? Stop Selfishness From Ruining Your Relationship*. “This kind of crisis can either pull a couple closer or tip their relationship over the edge,” she says.

Experts say the issue can surface with any couple. Strong relationships are vital, and they’re also key for better health. An Ohio State University study published in 2020 online in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology* found that among breast cancer survivors, a happy relationship was associated with lower stress levels and lower inflammation markers in their blood. Lower inflammation decreased a survivor’s risk of cancer recurrence and other illnesses, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and Alzheimer’s disease.

So how can you manage a relationship during an ongoing health issue? While no one should have to worry about how to breakup-proof their illness as they work to heal their body, experts do say there are specific challenges that couples face when a woman is ill and suggest ways to lighten the load. Here are those top five problems and how to mitigate each.

Challenge #1: Stress When you’re sick, your lifestyle and stress levels change. “Daily life becomes curtailed,” says Stark. “You eat differently, you can’t just go away for the weekend, and stress is magnified.” She says that simply recognizing that your illness can be hard on the partnership will help keep the peace. “Say to your partner: ‘I know this must be hard for you. How are you doing with all this? I really want to know,’” she suggests. Emphasizing that you’ll get through this as a team is important.

Challenge #2: Sex Illness often gets in the way of physical intimacy. “Widen the margins of your ordinary sexual lane to try something new within the construct of the relationship,” suggests Greer. You might give foot massages with essential oils, or lie in bed together with lit candles and your favorite music to foster intimacy, says Stark.

Challenge #3: Finances A sick person may not bring in as much money as she once did, and at the same time, medical costs will be more than usual. This can put new pressure on a partner. “Having a budget is crucial, with an eye on short- and long-term expenditures,” says Greer. Talking openly about this reality is also essential. “Normally, couples avoid the money topic,” says Stark. “If they can open up a conversation, acknowledging that it’s not [one person’s] fault but

a problem that belongs to both of them, it could go a long way.”

Challenge #4: Responsibilities “In every relationship, couples are measuring who’s doing what and handling more,” Greer notes. “So when [one person] becomes unavailable, [the other] focuses more on the fact that their own needs aren’t met than that their partner is ill and needs their help. They can resent doing double duty.” Work together to relieve the burden, Stark suggests, by accepting help from family and friends, ordering in groceries, and hiring a cleaning person and childcare, if you can.

Challenge #5: Appreciation Men in this situation can feel underappreciated for the burdens they carry, while women experience the all-consuming and demanding needs of their illness, Greer notes. Regularly check in to acknowledge what each partner is going through. “It helps a lot if the sick person can express appreciation for how much their partner is doing, how meaningful their support is, and how much they value it during this difficult time,” says Greer. And while you may have outlets for support, your partner may not. “Women are quick to pick up the phone or see a therapist to vent frustrations and fears, but men, who tend to be stoic, may need encouragement to talk to friends, family, or other outlets.” ✕

WHEN YOU’RE THE CAREGIVER

Admitting that you need help, practicing self-care, and preventing “caregiver stress” are top priorities for heading off burnout, says Linda Abbit, author of *The Conscious Caregiver: A Mindful Approach to Caring for Your Loved One Without Losing Yourself*. “A physically and emotionally healthy caregiver is automatically a better caregiver,” she says. It takes a village to be a caregiver, so Abbit emphasizes that children, extended family, neighbors, health care pros, clergy, paid caregivers, and community resources should be included in your circle. “Accept help whenever it’s offered, and learn to delegate to your village,” she notes,

adding that mental health professionals and support groups are a must if you feel anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed.

For self-care, she suggests creating a Happiness LIST (Likes, Interests, and Satisfying Things) that highlights hobbies and activities that make you feel fulfilled. Me-time activities might include meditation, reading, gardening, taking a walk, or listening to music. Finally, “don’t ‘should’ all over yourself,” Abbit says. “Make the best decisions you can with the information you have available at the time, and don’t second-guess them. Nobody is perfect. You’re a human being doing your best to do a superhuman job.”