

## **“In Sickness and in Health”**

When a groom is standing at the end of the aisle, anticipating his soon-to-be-wife, what is going through his head? What is going through the bride’s head? A good guess might be future dreams of vacations together, fun times, good memories, and hopes of a family. Seldom would thoughts of being bedridden or being diagnosed with a serious disease be of any thought. When a pastor says, “in sickness and in health”, what implications does this hold for your future life? Well, studies show it just might have relevance in your current marriage or future marriage. “At least 15 million—perhaps as many as 50 million—men and women in the U.S. provide long-term support for loved ones” (“How Caregiving Threatens,”2006). Sickness within marriage is something in which many people will have to deal with and which many couples are dealing with today. Chronic illness can be a strain for both married partners and the relationship, but there is hope for overcoming the hardship.

For the partner who is chronically ill, it can not only be physically hard to deal with, but emotionally, socially, and relationally. First of all, a chronically ill partner may not want to share their real feelings with their partner for fear of scaring them. Chronically ill partners can also suffer from guilt, because of their inability to help out. “They may feel guilty for not being able to contribute to the financial, emotional and intimacy needs of their spouse as they once could” (Bourque, 2008). This guilt can manifest itself to the point in which the sick partner starts to blame themselves for being sick. Not only is this detrimental to their own wellbeing, but to their spouse and the relationship in which they have. “The person suffering from chronic illness may begin to emotionally distance themselves from their spouse, friends and [even] family members”

(Bourque, 2008). A chronic illness not only affects the ill partner, but also has a large impact on the well spouse's life and well being.

Michael McKee, vice chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychology at the Cleveland Clinic says, "Half of long-term caregivers end up with clinical depression" ("How Caregiving Threatens," 2006). Another study, consisting "of caregivers aged 66-96 suggests that those who experience mental or emotional strain are at 63% greater risk of dying than peers who don't tend spouses" (as cited in "How Caregiving Threatens", 2006). Being a caregiver can involve a lot more responsibilities. These can include performing more chores around the house, taking on a supplemental job, and less social interaction in order to take care of their partner. As a caregiver, it may be hard not to over commit yourself in taking care of the ill spouse. When a person loves someone to the extent a spouse can love their partner, they will do almost anything and go to whatever length needed to help them. This need to help or fix can sometimes cause spousal burnout. "Spousal burnout causes physical and emotional exhaustion manifested by frequent headaches, episodes of heart palpitations, depression, feelings of loneliness and uselessness, social isolation, resentment, and a desire to leave home" (as cited in Cannon, 1998). Looking at all the things which caregivers take on, it may be no surprise to see that it is very easy to get over-stressed. It is important that caregivers take time for themselves and their own needs.

As a caregiver focuses their attention on their ill spouse the view of their own health may disappear. It is important for the caregiver to understand that if they themselves are not healthy and taken care of, they will be unable to care for their spouse. So in a sense, the most important task for the caretaker is caring for themselves first. Dr. McKee says, "first, ask yourself: What do I really like to do? [then suggests] Try to do it everyday, like walk[ing] through a garden, even just briefly" (as cited in "How Caregiving Threatens", 2006). This, he comments, might help

with the effects of burnout. Another step a caregiver can take to ensure their health is to understand they are not perfect. Taking care of a chronically ill partner is hard, but being hard on oneself because things may not be looking good at the time, is not productive and add more stress. A caregiver should try to focus on the understanding that they are under a lot of stress and need to be as little judgmentally focused on themselves as possible. Lastly, a caregiver should try and focus on the good things they have in their relationship. Thinking of all the good memories they've had with their spouse could help them alleviate some of the stress they may be feeling. Also, making it a point to make more good memories may take some focus off of always "taking care of" and onto "having fun".

Having a chronic illness in a relationship is hard for both the ill spouse and caregiver; it not only puts stress on them as individuals, but on their marriage. Marriage is definitely strained when "sickness" is added to the mix. For example, nationally the divorce rate is about 50%, but when you add sickness, the number increases to 75% (Johnson, 2002). Some of the causes which may lead to this increase are anxiety, fear, depression, and multiple social losses for both the ill spouse and caregiver. Having sickness within the marriage puts so much pressure and stress on both partners that their relationship can start to deteriorate overtime. "As [a] disease progresses, the sense of isolation and deprivation increases, and depression and irritability in one or both partners lead to further withdrawal within the marital relationship" (as cited in Cannon, 1998). This is a sad and hard realization. What happened to the "in sickness and in health" vows married spouses take? Can sickness have anything other than a negative affect on marriage?

Even though illness in a marriage can be very difficult to deal with, it can also be a benefit to the marriage. Illness, although bad, can bring a couple together and help them to appreciate more the time they spend together. As a person who has had family members

diagnosed with cancer along with myself, I have seen what good can come out of something so terrible. I know for a fact that my family would not be as close and well functioning as we are today, if it hadn't been for the illnesses we have had to struggle through. I have seen my parents as spouses become more wise, tender, compassionate, and forgiving towards one another. Sometimes things still do get a little hectic and stressful, but because we've gone through what we have and learned from our experiences, we are stronger because of it. Benjamin Franklin captured this concept well when he said, "Those things that hurt, instruct" (as cited in Johnson, 2002). It is comforting to realize negative circumstances can sometimes have positive impacts on a marriage. Just as sickness can positively affect marriage, the bond of marriage has an overwhelmingly positive influence during the course of the sickness.

Marriage may very well be a life-saving element in treatment. One study which compared married men with never-married men, showed never-married men had, "higher risks of mortality from cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, [and] external causes" (Ikeda, 2007). In the same study, never-married women had a "smaller but significantly higher risk of mortality from all causes" (Ikeda, 2007). A basic conclusion of these findings would be that single status correlates with a higher risk of death than does a married status. This may be because marriage impacts both partners in ways which keeps them healthy. For instance, "marriage generally has a beneficial effect on health because it provides social support and social security, and married persons are likely to experience less distress and to have a healthier lifestyle" (Ikeda, 2007). Marriage also helps people cope better, which in turn lessens stress and improves health. From these findings, a person could contemplate how the decreasing rate of marriage and the increasing rate of divorce and cohabitation may become an important health issue in the future.

Both marriage and illness can have positive impacts on each other, but it is important to look at how to successfully deal with the illness when it so unexpectedly finds its way into marriage. The first thing a couple can do is talk. It is important to communicate because it helps both spouses understand what the other one is thinking and feeling, which in turn releases tension and keeps tension from rising. “Improved reciprocal communication of thoughts and feelings may [also] increase the closeness of partners and facilitate the use of adaptive coping strategies” (Cannon, 1998). Being able to accept your new reality is another step towards dealing with the illness. It is obviously hard for both spouses to deal with the misfortune, but it is essential for married spouses to be able to focus combined efforts in becoming a resilient couple. Getting an education is also an important part in dealing with the illness. Many times an illness will leave a couple unprepared for how the illness will affect their day-to-day lives. Having a better understanding of the implications of the illness will enable the spouses to prepare for the future and what it may hold. As the caretaker, it may be hard not to become over bearing in the relationship, especially when the one that you love most dearly is ill. It is important to know that being over bearing or becoming the “health police” can be hurtful to the sick spouse’s well-being. “Studies show that when the well spouse joins this police force (the medical team, doctor, dietician, therapist, etc), the well spouse is more likely to resist following doctor’s orders” (Harrar). Instead, a caregiver should try to give support, encouragement, and express compassion. Being able to throw negativity out the window is yet another way that can help both spouses in their patient-caretaker relationship. Having the ability to deal with such feelings like anger, anxiety, depression, and pessimism is essential when trying to focus on the positives of the relationship. As a couple works towards this goal, they are able to spend more of their time with each other and on activities they used to enjoy like seeing friends and getting out of the

house. Lastly, showing physical affection to one another can help. Simple things like kissing, holding hands, and massages can make a big difference. “The more touch, the better. It’s soothing, cuts stress, and makes you feel closer and happier” (Harrar). Utilizing these tools while dealing with illness within marriage can get couples through the hard times and onto the life both of them still have to live together.

In conclusion, illness can be very hard to deal with, especially since it is something that most people don’t anticipate dealing with in their lifetime. A married couple, however, can overcome the struggles and live a happy, fulfilling life together - one where the chronic illness doesn’t control marriage, but becomes another small manageable part of it. It is also important to remember that God always has a plan and that he will work everything out for the good. In Psalm 22:5 it says, “They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed”. This passage points to Christ as our caretaker in marriage, through him we will overcome.

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