

When a spouse becomes sick

By Ellen Waldman

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“It’s so hard”. She then paused and said, “And lonely”. Without intending to, I overheard an older woman saying this to a younger person. She continued to explain that her husband has dementia and she’s doing her best to cope with it. Marriages are often shaken to the core when one spouse becomes sick or disabled and the other takes on new responsibilities.

“The longer you’ve been married, the harder that is to do,” said Zachary White, the author of “The Unexpected Journey of Caring: The Transformation from Loved One to Caregiver.”

Compared to adult children who care for their parents, spouses perform more tasks and assume greater physical and financial burdens when they become caregivers. Symptoms of depression as well as strains on relationships are more common. Most of the time (55%), older spouses are caregiving alone as husbands or wives come to the end of their lives, without help from their children, other family members, friends or paid caregivers.

Marriage is such a strong bond that if one partner falls seriously ill, the healthy spouse is put at a significant risk of dying, suggests the largest study yet of couples over 65. If one spouse is hospitalized, the other partners’ chance of dying increases significantly for up to two years, researchers found. It’s suggested that a couples’ combined health should be considered when treating elderly patients.

How to handle this with better outcomes requires some planning. Start with some basics. Reset expectations. Face what is being lost as a result of illness and, at the same time, focus on what remains intact. Here are some additional practical suggestions.

Divvy up responsibilities as much as possible. Often this is challenged as one spouse becomes less able to function and the other takes on more responsibilities. Create a list of everything that needs to be done in your household. If there are things that neither of you wants to do, brainstorm ways to find help. Expand your network. If friends and family members don’t seem to understand what you’re going through, find people who do. Be prepared to pay for this help, if you’re able.

Finding people to help might mean more than just your nearby friends. Here’s an organization that might meet that some of that need. It’s called the Well Spouse Association (<https://wellspouse.org>). This group provides support for spousal caregivers and the general public about the special challenges and unique issues that well spouses face every day. It has meetings via Zoom. Contact Carol (503) 358-5802, christofero65@gmail.com; or Deborah (310) 601-0445, for more details on attending.

Also, for those caring for someone with any cognitive impairment diseases, contact The Alzheimer’s Association. Our local representative is Lori Stanton (541-772-2230; lstanton@alz.org.) The Alzheimer’s Helpline is available 24/7 at 800-272-3900, for reliable information and consultations, as well.

Too often, people feel guilty if they can’t seem to handle the new roles, responsibilities and changes of being a caregiver to their partner. They might not know what resources are available or how to consider

options outside of their home, if this situation is no longer workable. Instead of struggling alone, reach out for those who know how to help you find the resources you need now and into the future.

I've heard the expression, "when one person gets an illness, there are often two people suffering". Perhaps if the woman I overheard knew about these resources, she would not feel like her life was too hard and too lonely. I hope some of these solutions might help you, too.