

Walking A Tough Path

How would you cope if your spouse became ill?

Stress – we have all experienced it at one time or another. Those of us who manage to break out of its icy grips look back, none too fondly, and breathe a sigh of relief. For someone who is in a relationship where a loved one suddenly or slowly becomes ill, stress can take on a different form, resulting in a myriad of emotions. Anger, frustration, sadness, worry, and despair are just some of the emotions which take their toll, not only on the “strong one,” but also on the one who is ill, the relationship, the family, friendships, work and quality of life. That, in turn, has a separate set of side-effects.

When I was approached to write an article on this topic, my first thought was, “write about something you know!” In my case, it is from the perspective of both someone who is caring for a spouse who is ill and also as someone who has been living with a chronic disease, Rheumatoid Arthritis, for 30 years.

I remember when I was diagnosed; even as the years passed by, I, generally didn't spend a lot of time worrying about my disease process. Instead, I would focus on worrying about other things, which would leave me feeling drained and sleepless. Thanks to the stress work I did, and now share with others, I've learned to transform those thoughts to ones that leave me balanced – emotionally, mentally and physically. Most of the time.

My disease has meant flare-ups, surgeries and fatigue, plus limited ability to work. As time goes on, I need stronger and more costly medications and more help as mobility decreases. It is important to consider and learn to deal effectively with the ensuing ups and downs: days when you feel that there is hope and others when you are feeling frustrated.

On those days, it's important to be kind to yourself and do what makes you feel better – breathe, journal, share. Learn techniques to lower your stress which then affects how you feel. We all have our own “internal pharmacy” activated by our thoughts and feelings. The bottom line is, that strategies need to be put into place to help get you through the rough patches. Some problem-solving is required to take care of the practicalities of basic living arrangements, which can include shopping, meal preparation and maintaining a household.

Life suddenly took an unexpected and frightening turn when my husband developed an anxiety disorder which, although it had been on-going, has just recently been diagnosed. The tipping point came when he lost his job and with it, his confidence. What became *time off* to regroup, actually grew into a larger problem – not only for him, but for our relationship. This has created a roller coaster of feelings – fear being the big one, which then fans out to anger, frustration and more fear. It has been a true learning experience for both of us and one that has brought us to the brink of divorce.

I was angry at him and still do get angry from time to time, which for me, is often a masquerade for hurt. I felt that if only he would *stop that* or *try harder* or *apply* some of the many techniques that are available to him, he would feel better and get back to work. (Why are we hardest on those close to us?)

I also felt that I should be able to help him deal with his issues of anxiety and that his progress, or in this case, lack of, was a reflection on me and what I do which is teaching people how to effectively deal with their stressors. On one level, I know that you can lead a horse to water, but unless that horse is willing to drink, no amount of coaxing will force him to drink. Easy to say, when “the horse” isn't yours! This takes on a whole different meaning when it becomes personal. In other words, unless you've walked in those shoes, it's easy to judge. That's where compassion is necessary and beneficial.

The way in which I deal with my disease was also the way in which I approached this situation. A great deal of energy went into getting answers – letters to doctors, research on the Internet, discussions with friends and family. This is what I do - I get busy. I found that I was wearing out and wearing

down. In fact, I was engaging in “over-care,” a term which The Institute of HeartMath (www.heartmath.org) describes as a heavy, stressful feeling, one which is worrisome and stress-producing. Incidentally, the Old English definition for “care” means “to grieve”.

In my over-care mode, I had forgotten that true care is regenerative for both ourselves and the recipient. This is hard to achieve when someone is seriously ill, and there are so many real problems with which to deal. Often, in addition to looking after basic living arrangements, all the person needs is someone to truly listen and not necessarily fix the problem.

I've had to learn this one the hard way. (Isn't that how we learn our best and most valuable lessons?) And, no one can do it for us.. Sometimes we need to step back and let the person walk his or her own path, using whatever bits of information fit his or her particular situation. Often, that's where the greatest learning and growth comes in.

If you wish to help someone who has become incapacitated and is unable to look after her or his own basic needs, it is best to offer concrete help as opposed to a very general, “Let me know, if I can help.” The person who needs help may be reluctant to ask, so it is much easier for them to accept, “I'm going grocery shopping this afternoon, what can I get you?” or “I'll vacuum your living room or do a load of laundry while I'm here.”

From the point of view of the one who is ill, don't be afraid to ask for and receive help, but also to do what is right for you. In other words, realistically look at your situation and recognize that time and energy are at a premium and that it's OK to accept help and support.

In my situation with my husband, I've learned to step back – that I can't fix or do everything. Some things just don't need fixing and worrying doesn't really help the situation. Endless worrying resolves nothing; although there is a misguided belief that we're doing something. Worrying is emotionally, mentally and physically draining. It causes us to lose the only time we really have – the present. By worrying about what *may* happen, we miss the quality of time that is before us **now**.

There's a great paradox in life: the more we resist, the greater the struggle. Once you accept the situation, you are able to look at it differently – with compassion. Compassion is an admirable trait, but not so easily achieved or felt when your world appears to be crumbling before your very eyes. What can you do when you find yourself stumbling along a tough path? Appreciate the person and the time you have and the help that is available. This is a gift for the one who is ill; he or she will be comforted in knowing that you care and are there.

My husband is making progress, for which I am thankful. There is improvement and there is hope. For others, the outcome isn't always as bright.

Regardless of the illness or disease, it can be a time of great emotional healing; it can be a time filled with some of the richest, most fulfilling moments in which the best in each person is brought out. Once you accept the situation you give up the resistance to fight, and that can lead to healing and growth for all concerned. It may not be exactly what you planned and, often, it is far greater than you imagined.

Marianna Paulson
Auntie Stress
www.auntiestress.ca
info@auntiestress.ca
604.507.9970