

Communicating As A Couple

A few suggestions to keep a lasting and loving relationship while coping with kidney disease
by Kathi Niccum Ed.D

Chronic illness changes relationships. Couples dealing with chronic illness often face adjustments to their daily lives, hopes, dreams and expectations. Yet all relationships change over time - that's their nature. Making adjustments to life's circumstances is certainly a part of life, too! So, what are the particular challenges that partners coping with chronic illness face? How can couples recognize and avoid some of the pitfalls that could damage communication and companionship? The following set of remarks, one from the perspective of a patient with renal disease and the other from the perspective of the person's partner, may shed some light on one typical problem and offer a surprising solution.

Patient's Concern: My partner always tries to do things for me. Although I have kidney failure and some days I really do feel lousy, I don't need to be treated like a baby! What can I do?

Partner's Concern: My partner has kidney failure and won't do anything for himself anymore. It seems I have to do things for him. I am not his workhorse! What can I do?

Problem

Chronic illness often changes what you can do, your energy level, and your outlook on life. Tasks once shared or done separately may have to be redistributed to reflect the changes chronic illness can bring. Sometimes these changes are permanent and sometimes they are only temporary, depending on the severity of the disease, the patient's progress and what the patient can manage on any particular day.

But it doesn't just depend on the patient. When chronic illness strikes an individual, their partners and other family members often change their roles and responsibilities to help the affected person. For instance, the well partner may take over paying the bills, doing laundry, or cutting the grass. Learning how to reassess what tasks you do, how you do them, as well as, when and how often you do them, is something both partners need to address. Knowing when to do something for the person with the illness and when to encourage the person to do it for him/herself even if it does take a bit of effort is difficult.

Likewise, knowing when to push and when to accept help can be difficult for the ill person. So, to do or not do is not totally dependent upon ability or availability. Creating a way for couples to find and bring about together what works best for them begins with communication and of course ... honesty.

Solution

1. Share feelings

Let your partner know how you feel. Using words like "baby" and "workhorse" don't tell how you feel. They label your partner's behavior toward you as you see it. They say, "This is what you've made of me." Before you know it, you'll be arguing about, "Who does what for whom?" and finger pointing to the tune of "Who's guilty here?" Soon hurtful comments will be flying back and forth. And of course nothing will be resolved. Don't think you can slip in a statement beginning with "You make me feel..." as a way of expressing your feelings because that's only an attempt to make your partner responsible for your feelings (which really isn't possible, anyway). It's only a way of passing the buck and making your partner responsible for what you do or don't do. Sorry, you can't get off the hook that easily. Besides, you want to be in control of yourself, don't you?

To begin working on a constructive solution, both patient and partner first must be honest with themselves about what they feel and what their true concerns are. In the above scenario, the patient could say "I feel suffocated by my partner's constant attention" or "It makes me feel helpless when you do everything for me." The partner could say, "I feel resentful that I have to take on all of these household responsibilities without support" or "I feel scared that my partner's health will get worse." Do you hear the difference? When you talk about your feelings you are not putting your partner down and you are identifying what is really going on. Starting a sentence with "I feel" will keep you on track by acknowledging your feelings and taking ownership for them.

If you are uncomfortable telling your partner what you think and feel, then you may find it easier to write your partner a note or draw a picture about how you feel. Be creative!

Then, regardless of how you share your concern with your partner, set up a meeting to talk about it and come up with a plan of action.

2. Schedule a time to meet

Choose a day and time to meet. Choose a quiet place to talk. It might be at the dining room table, a picnic table, or at a café over coffee. Choose a one-hour block of uninterrupted time that is not too late or too early in the day for either person. Turn off the phone or let the answering machine get it.

3. What supplies you need

- 3 blank sheets of paper

- 2 pencils or pens
- 1 timer or a watch

4. Action steps for change

- a) The person who requested the meeting goes first. Take five minutes to state the problem from your perspective and share your feelings. Your partner listens intently and does not say anything.
- b) Your partner takes a maximum of five minutes to share his/her feelings and perspective and you listen intently.
- c) Each of you takes another three-five minutes to respond to what the other person said.
- d) Each of you takes a sheet of paper and each of you writes down on one side of the paper what you would like your partner to do differently. Stick to the specific issue and take a maximum of five minutes for this activity.
- e) Then turn your sheet of paper over and write down what you think you could do differently. Take a maximum of five minutes.
- f) Take ten minutes to share both sides of your lists with each other.
- g) Take another ten minutes for each of you to choose two things from your list of what you could do differently and two things from your partner's list of what he/she would like you to do differently. Then each of you writes these down as what you agree to do differently on the third piece of paper.
- h) Post this third sheet of paper in a place where both of you can use it as a reminder of what you've agreed to do. Set up another meeting time in four weeks to see how things are going.

During the four weeks, work very hard to make the changes you agreed upon. Don't talk about if the changes are working or not, and don't try other changes before the four weeks are up. Remember, you chose the changes you agreed to make and so make them willingly and with a joyful heart. If you complain about what you are doing, you will be setting up the program for failure.

At your meeting four weeks later, review your sheet and talk about the changes you made related to the specific problem. Did you accomplish your goal of change? Is the issue still a problem? If the changes are effective and the issue is no longer a problem, go celebrate! If one of you did not keep your agreement or the changes haven't been effective in eliminating or decreasing the problem, go back to step one to discuss what isn't working and what are some additional changes that might help.

Summary

This is just one way to find workable solutions to problems that occur between partners when dealing with a chronic illness. The keys to problem solving are to communicate honestly, listen to your partner, stay focused on one problem at a time, and be responsible for your own behavior.

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