

In Sickness And In Health

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When I started this series I sent a survey out to 15 of my friends in different stages of marriage. One of the questions was, "If your spouse/partner were to become seriously ill, would you/could you care for them and handle this new situation in your marriage/relationship?"

The answers may surprise some of you, but did not surprise me. My husband and I both took the survey and both of us answered the same as many others did. "Depends on the illness and what care is required." Statistically, our answers are not so far off the mark even though they may sound callous.



<http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Why-Men-Leave-Sick-Wives-Facing-Illness-Alone-Couples-and-Cancer/>

A 2009 study published in the journal of Cancer found that a married woman diagnosed with a serious disease is six times more likely to be divorced or separated than a man with a similar diagnosis. Among study participants, the divorce rate was 21 percent for seriously ill women and 3 percent for seriously ill men.

These days, notes Jimmie Holland, MD, caregivers fill a larger role than ever: "In the past, a person would stay at the hospital for weeks. Now people come home with wounds that need to be cleaned, and all kinds of other things we once used to think only nurses could do."

When we marry, we take vows that include "in sickness and in health." It should therefore be assumed that when one spouse becomes seriously ill, it is the duty of the other spouse to stand by them and provide care and support.

I find when talking to married couples, that not everyone is a born caregiver and simply can not emotionally or physically care for a seriously ill spouse, while others find an inner strength in themselves they never imagined they had.

This blog tells the stories of three very brave readers who lived with or are living with an illness in their marriage/relationship. I hope you all find them as inspiring as I did.

Chris and Amber, "It's Always Something"

Chris and Amber have been together 5 years. As a gay couple, they can not legally marry in the state they reside in, however they share a love that is just as strong if not stronger than many who can legally marry.

Chris was a very successful businesswoman, independent, a wonderful mother to her young son and starting a new relationship with Amber when she was diagnosed with several illnesses all at once. She was hospitalized multiple times, has had several surgeries as well as battling cancer last year.

Amber, who has a background in nursing, did not think twice. She immediately took over Chris's care.

She commented to me, "my partner means everything to me. She is my best friend, my rock, the one I laugh with, spend every minute of every day with and can't get enough. She means the world to me and I would do anything for her."

Chris echoed this with her response, *"My partner means everything to me, I wouldn't give her up for anything and would do just about anything for her especially if she was ill."*

Chris is now disabled and can not work and this has caused both financial and emotional strain for the relationship, but the bond and commitment of these two amazing women should be an inspiration to us all. Government refuses to acknowledge them as a married couple, but they exhibit the true meaning of what marriage is supposed to be.

Joe and Bunny, "Death Was Not The End Of Their Love Story:

I met Joe in 2006 on a medical web site when I thought I had cervical cancer and his beloved wife, Bunny was battling lung cancer. Joe was so appealing because most of the people on this site were those actually suffering

from cancer, most were women and here was this husband pouring his heart out each day to any who would listen about the love he had for his wife and how he was going to be there every step of the way to make her well again.

Bunny suffered with severe back pain for several years before getting the devastating diagnosis of lung cancer. Joe commented that the day she was diagnosed ***"my jets went totally Bunny!"***

Joe went to every doctor appointment and even lost his job because of the time he needed to take off to be with Bunny and care for her.

After my cancer scare was determined to be lab error, I stayed in touch with Joe and I was at the bay when I got word from him his beloved Bunny had passed. I took flowers from my garden and went to the water and said a prayer for Bunny and Joe. We have been dear friends ever since.

Joe has never forgotten Bunny. In fact if you talk to him today about any topic, he will likely bring it back to a ***"Bunny"*** story. He has not remarried and expresses his grief through the music he loves and keeps Bunny's memory alive whenever given the chance.

"In sickness and in health" was a promise Joe made to Bunny and she made to him. Bunny's cancer was a mountain to climb, they did it together and when only Joe was left standing, his love for Bunny did not die with her body.

Her soul and the life they shared, the memories they made together, Joe keeps alive and through him, those who never met Bunny feel honored to know the beautiful woman she was, the Angel she is today. That Joe keeps her memory alive for all of us to know the beautiful soul she was is a true gift. The gift from Bunny to Joe and from Joe to all of us who get to know this exceptional woman through him.

Kathi and Larry, " Living With Chronic Illnesses And Still In Love":

In 1990, Kathi, was happily married, had a job she loved and was raising three children. After being tested with one seriously ill child early in her marriage, life was good. Her marriage was strong and her three children, including her son, who had completely recovered from his illness as an infant, were all healthy.

This was the year the biggest test revealed itself. Kathi as not feeling well and after many medical professionals writing off her symptoms, she was finally diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia.

Each of these diseases by themselves can be debilitating, but combined, they are disabling. Kathi faced two hurdles in even getting a proper diagnosis. Today, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia are recognized as true diseases, back then they were not. Kathi's first test was to convince her doctors there was something very wrong other than just being tired all the time and in excruciating pain.

It took a year to get the diagnosis and several more to win her disability status so she could once again contribute something to her family's income. Kathi shared several quotes with me that helped her along the way and she wanted to share them with you.

"Learning to accept a diagnosis as uncertain as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome does not come quickly or easily. It is said one mourns the loss of one's good health in much the same way one mourns the loss of a loved one."

"Learning to accept the reality of a chronic illness is crucial to regaining a sense of control over my life. I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia. The names are not terribly comforting, but at least they have a name."

After the diagnosis, Kathi had to then take stock of how this illness would not only affect her own life, but her family's as well.

"I don't have this illness alone, my whole family has it. It changed everyone's life."

Kathi could no longer work and that changed the financial dynamic of her family. She worried as her children were still young when she was diagnosed, they would not have the best of their mother. Her husband, while becoming the sole bread winner of the family, also had to take over chores he and Kathi used to share as she was no longer able to do them.

Her children also had to step up and cook dinners, help more around the house as on bad days Kathi slept 18 hours, had very poor balance and could not write a check or sign her name.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is a silent illness. People who don't know her, look at Kathi and think she is healthy. They don't see her on bad days which happen more frequently as her illness progresses and with the added diagnosis of COPD, in 2009. She now uses oxygen regularly in order to function.

"It is the uncertainty that is so difficult to live with. If I knew I was going to get better in a year or even five years, I think I could manage. To not know whether I will ever be well is devastating."

Through it all, Kathi's family has been by her side. Her husband, Larry is the same loving wonderful man she married 39 years ago when they took those vows, "in sickness and health." He meant them, as did Kathi when Larry suffered a heart attack in 2007 and she was by his side every step of his recovery.

Her children are adults now with families of their own and they have used the lessons their mother and her illnesses taught them to become caring, beautiful human beings.

The three stories I told here are different but the following quotes Kathi lives by may send a message to all who are living with illness or loss of a loved one.

In the 24 years she and her family have lived with chronic illness she recites these quotes to herself each day:

"I don't choose to be called a victim of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, of any illness. I prefer to call myself a survivor!!!!!"

Her personal favorite: ***"I have lost function, strength and mental ability but I will fight for my dignity and self respect!"***

Many marriages fail when one partner becomes ill and the other can simply not handle it. This blog shared three stories of relationships that not only survived, but thrived in the face of illness and even death.

We should take a lesson from these three amazing couples. Do we mean it when we say, ***"In Sickness And In Health?"*** Can illness make a marriage/relationship stronger?

You, my readers, be the judge. Share your stories with me or comment on the stories you read here.