

5 Grace-Filled Tips for the Spouse Who Is Also a Caregiver

If your marriage has had a reasonable degree of closeness and love, when one spouse becomes ill it affects the other deeply. Sure, there are the “little” things such as the flu or a necessary surgery. But what about when the illness is ongoing, chronic and perhaps eventually terminal? What happens to your marriage when you become your spouse’s caregiver?

That was my experience. My husband Al had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. For years, our life together was increasingly marked by doctor’s visits, managing medications, medical equipment and eventually repeated hospitalizations. I increasingly became his caregiver. Al hated that, even though he was grateful. He would have much preferred taking care of me.

It was an honor to be the one God chose to care for my husband during the last years of his life. It was also physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausting. I rarely got a full night’s sleep. Finding time to be alone with God was often very difficult.

Here are some of the things I learned during that season that perhaps will be helpful for you if your spouse has a long-term illness.

1. Don’t take over.

Don’t take over aspects of your spouse’s life that they are still able to manage. Help them maintain their dignity wherever possible. There may be many aspects of daily living that you could do for him/her much quicker and easier. But it’s important your spouse do anything he/she can do for

him/herself.

If your spouse can do it him/herself, let them do so. If they can do it with your help, assist but don't take over. If they are truly unable to do it, help without complaining. What that looks like may of course change over time.

2. Talk about the tough stuff.

While my husband and I talked freely about many things, there are still things I wish I had said and conversations I wish we had had. With rare exceptions talking about life and death, money, intimacy, the future, what you're each afraid of or hope for, etc. can keep you closer.

Don't shy away from the difficult topics for fear of making your spouse more uncomfortable. He/she is almost certainly thinking about it anyway; talking together about it can make both of you feel less alone. You can both feel better about solutions you come up with together.

3. Maximize intimacy

Remember that sex is not intimacy. Sex and intimacy overlap, but they are not the same. If sex is still possible, go for it! There may be modifications in how you engage with each other physically that can keep sex going even with longstanding illness.

But even more important, stay emotionally and spiritually connected. Make sure you don't only talk about illness. Share times together, even just moments together, where you can laugh, cry, learn, enjoy, etc.

Continue to make memories together. Watch a movie together. Enjoy a visit from the grandkids if you have them. If there's an event you want to attend or a place you want to visit, invest the time and energy to make it happen even if it's hard. Read a book together. Pray together.

4. Accept help.

Being sick and caregiving are both exhausting. Give each other grace. Neither of you will do this perfectly.

But don't try to do it alone either. As a caregiver, be intentional about getting your own emotional/mental/spiritual nourishment. If your spouse can stay alone for periods of time, it's OK to get out for a while. If they can't, accept help from other family members, church acquaintances or respite care organizations. There are times you may need to move your spouse into another care facility. None of that is easy. Remember; you're not super spouse; you don't have to do it all!

And accept help from your sick spouse too. That may be emotional support for your own struggle. It helped Al to still feel important when he could offer me insight or ideas or emotional support for things I was trying to deal with. Whenever possible, that's a good thing.

5. Feed yourself

I've already mentioned intentionally looking for your own mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment. You must have that to maintain the resilience necessary to be there for your spouse. This also involves doing what you can to care for yourself physically—physical exercise, healthy food and so on.

And most of all stay connected to the only real source of strength: God Himself. It may be easy to feel isolated, overwhelmed and exhausted. But remember that Jesus sees you, understands you and will be with you. Keep going to Him for the emotional strength to treat your spouse as He needs you to treat them.

Katherine and Jay Wolfe's story *Hope Heals* is only one such example of couples who have navigated this difficult journey. You are not alone.

And know that whether this season lasts a few weeks, several months or many years, it will come to an end. God has entrusted you with your spouse, in some measure, to be His hands and feet to them for this season.

May Jesus bless you with His wisdom, strength and love as you are “Jesus with skin on” to your spouse.

Your Turn: *If you are your spouse’s caregiver, what has been the hardest part? What has helped you keep going? Leave a comment below. {eo}*

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