

5 Things Caregiving Spouses Should Know

Dear friend,

I don't know exactly what drew you to this post, but I'm guessing it was bad news. Perhaps your spouse was recently given a terminal diagnosis or has been struggling with something chronically debilitating for years. Maybe you have a friend whose walking a spouse through the Shadowy Valley of illness or injury and you've run out of advice or encouragement. Whatever brought you, I'm glad you're here.

Nearly every day, I receive emails or phone calls from people who are reeling from the shock of their spouse's diagnosis or suffocating beneath the weight of responsibility they carry as they try to navigate their new role as caregiver while also hoping to hang onto their role as husband or wife.

I wish I could linger over coffee with every person experiencing this – not because I have all the answers, but because I remember the first days so well, wondering if I'd survive and longing for someone who had been there to assure me that I just might. So, here's what I would say if we could have that coffee:

1. This will be hard. Really hard. But you will survive. You absolutely will. I don't even know you and I can already tell you're a fighter.
2. I don't know this for sure, but there's a good chance that no matter how much you love your spouse, there will be days when you would like to run away. Your heart may want to push away from the seemingly never-ending shores of grief, with a longing for something new and exciting or old and familiar. You may wish with all your might for what was or you may be filled with the desperate desire for the

reassurance that life will still exist when the dust settles.

I don't know the details of your longings, but hear this and hear it well: *You are not bad for having them.* You are normal. You are human. You are heartbroken. You are *not* bad.

3. You will need help. Start thinking about how to get it before you're desperate for it. You will need medical help (caregivers – really, you will and I'll write a separate post someday to tell you why but for now? Please trust me) and you may also need help with finances, housekeeping, grocery shopping, etc. It is not weak to need help; it's wise and strong and a gift to those who long to step in and serve you.

For my money, the most important thing you need right now is a person who will ask for and organize the help you need – a person who is not you.

4. If there's one determination you could make right now that I think will serve you well for the rest of your battle, it's this: *I will keep my heart soft for others, for my spouse and for myself. In doing so, I will keep myself safe from the poison of bitterness.* If there was one more determination you could make (bonus!), it would be: *I will take every opportunity to rest or to laugh that comes my way.*

5. When your loved one is on the other side of this illness, you will still have yourself. You can't get away from yourself, so try to be fun to be with. Don't live in regret.

Don't live in fear. Don't live victimized. Live real. Live raw. Live healthy. Live love. You can't go wrong if you remember to keep living.

So, I guess that's it. I mean, it's not – there are a million other things I would say if I could, but these are the things I most want you to know because they are the things that have saved my life in the hardest and most beautiful season I've ever experienced. I hope they give you hope.

You're my hero.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of Beautiful Battliefields, Ruthless: Knowing the God Who Fights For You and When the Holidays Hurt (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends, and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon.