

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Coping with an Illness in Your Marriage

This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 13, "Coping with an Illness in Your Marriage."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm the host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here, at least by phone, with David Garver, a marriage and family therapist who practices with University Psychological Associates in Charlotte, North Carolina. How are you David?

David Garver: I'm fine. Good morning.

Lee Rosen: Now, David holds a master's degree in counseling psychology from the University of San Francisco. And before joining University Psychological Associates, David and his family lived in San Francisco where David worked as a community mental health person in private practice. Now, David how long have you been in Charlotte?

David Garver: Just about a year now.

Lee Rosen: Okay and you're enjoying it?

David Garver: Yes, I am. I'm actually a native of North Carolina and I lived in San Francisco for about 15 years.

Lee Rosen: Great. Well San Francisco's a great city, but so is Charlotte. I think you've really gone from kind of one extreme to the other. They're awfully different in a lot of ways.

David Garver: That's true.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Well do you find so far -- a year of working in Charlotte, are you finding that people's issues really are universal? Are they the same issues that you're dealing with in Charlotte that you were dealing with in San Francisco?

David Garver: That's true. Yeah work and family, developing personal lives and the quality of life that people want is universal.

Lee Rosen: Well I am really glad that you could join us. This whole issue of illness in a marriage, it became an issue in my life. I had nine years ago had a heart attack and quintuple bypass surgery at 37 years of age; I mean, I have a little glimpse of it. I imagine that people that are -- you know, for us it resulted in a lot of kind of lifestyle changes and more exercise and cooking differently and all of that, but I would imagine that in families where the illness -- in a way, it felt like that illness kind of came and we managed it and it was under control and we sort of adjusted and moved on. I would imagine you're seeing people that have illnesses that really -- they're dealing with them forever, which must be very different.

David Garver: It is and it just really impacts, as I'm sure your experience showed you. It's not just within the couple. It just ripples out through the entire family and friends. It just touches every point of someone's life. With someone dealing with it long-term, there's so many implications to manage along the way and so many unknowns that keep a sense of normalcy, feeling like it's just out of reach or people trying to understand what will the new normal be and that can just really feel elusive with something that is sustained over time.

Lee Rosen: When you think of these issues, are we really focusing on an illness where one of the spouses is dealing with the illness or are we looking at illnesses that might be with the children or even with the extended family affecting the marriage?

David Garver: Well, my experience has been with couples or individuals who, where one of the spouses has an illness and some have been shorter term or the resolve has been quick, as your experience was; and some have been, again, with longer term implications such as cancer, Parkinson's, MS, lupus, something that's going to need to be managed for a long, long time.

Lee Rosen: How common is this? Is this something you see a lot of?

David Garver: I've seen a very low percentage in my overall practice, but I've encountered people at all different points along the path. Some

couples I've worked with, I've been working with them for a little time on other issues and then they come in the next session and they sit down and they're just literally in shock.

Lee Rosen: So I'm wondering, when people come to you and they've obviously just learned about this illness and I would assume emotions are running especially high at that point, true?

David Garver: True. Again, people are just really dealing with the shock and there's almost just a typical grief response where there are a lot of emotions of denial and anger, sadness and almost an instant feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, because there's so many unknowns.

Lee Rosen: What happens when -- you know, you talk about this helplessness and powerlessness and I'm being stereotypical, but a lot of relationships, I think -- I mean, you tell me if I'm wrong, but I think sort of one spouse may really drive it, that there may be kind of a dominant person that kind of keeps this family going. What -- a) is that true? And b) if it is, what happens if that's the person who's suffering from the illness?

David Garver: You're not wrong, Lee. Sometimes there can be a more dominant spouse or someone who tends to take the lead in the family, however that's defined in terms of finances and deciding how money is spent and vacations. When that person is the one who has the illness, the other spouse can be left with, how am I going to handle this? And just feels like they're starting from scratch and gathering their strengths and ability to find resources and deal with it on their own as well as take care of the spouse.

Lee Rosen: When my whole heart thing went on, we had almost a brand new baby, a second child. And the overload, I think, from my wife between coping with what was going on with me -- and we're talking literally being in the hospital and scheduling surgery and all that -- and managing kids and this whole lifestyle change that we knew was coming, was just like oh my goodness, overwhelm.

David Garver: Yes, and I'm sure just not knowing what the outcome would be, you literally had both new life and potentially death right there side by side and the birth of a new baby is just wonderful and can bring up all sorts of emotions and then to have that juxtaposed right beside potentially loss of a spouse can just bring up a lot of mixed feeling.

Lee Rosen: So what do you tell people? How do you help them through all of this?

David Garver: In couples where one spouse has been recently diagnosed and they're -- and again, earlier I believe I referenced working with a couple and they come in the next session and they're telling me they just learned of the diagnosis. Again we really talk about the shock of the news. I work with them each on being able to express their fears, their concerns, their expectations, letting them know that each may have differing feelings about that or they may each express different fears and concerns.

We kind of start to set a framework of how they can make decisions as a couple for their daily life, around the treatment decisions they may be facing. We identify resources and supports, be it family or friends, church, if they're attending, or other groups. We identify stresses that hopefully can be cut out or managed in a different way so they are not impacting them with the same -- they're not having to devote as much energy as they were.

I tell clients and couples that it's okay and it's really necessary to conserve their emotional, mental, and physical energies to get through this and I work with them on giving themselves permission to do this. You know, sometimes when people identify a resource for them -- for example, the friends or family members -- those are people that can provide that emotional support and it's really important in that time, friends and family can step up and they do things from providing meals, providing childcare, running errands, just visiting and talking with the couple.

At the same time, those can be stresses as well. The family or the couple feels like they need to contact everybody by phone. I have all these phone calls to make and that way it can feel burdensome. And usually family members and friends generally can be understanding and can take care of themselves, but sometimes not and it can be a stress as well, because those people are dealing with their own concerns and emotions about what's going on and what's going to happen.

Lee Rosen: So it sounds like that some people are the folks that you're already seeing and that are having their own things going on and then the illness strikes and then there are other people that are in deceive, because the illness has come and they've got to address that. When those people have already been seeing you -- and obviously they're seeing you because they've got some stuff going on that they need help with -- does the illness have the effect of sort of creating a truce and suspending some of the problems and bringing them together?

David Garver: I think sometimes that the implications -- or my experience has been that it does put the other problems sort of in perspective. They

realize this illness is going to progress and the ill spouse is going to require more and more care as time wears on. Couples have come in and said to me, "We want to work through these other issues, because we have feelings about them, but the relationship is really important and we want to work through these other issues," so that they don't carry those feelings attached to the other unresolved issues forward as the one spouse needs more and more care. So they kind of want to resolve those issues and it really brings them closer, or can bring them closer, together.

Lee Rosen: Now, you've got to be dealing with a lot of emotions that are happening with the spouse that is not sick that. I mean, give me a sense of that. They must be having their own big time emotional response to all of this that relates to the way -- well, you tell me; I don't really know.

David Garver: Yeah. To expand on what we've talked about a little bit, the well spouse can have a lot of feelings of guilt around how this illness is affecting their life. The ill spouse has to go through treatment and treatment in and of itself can be traumatizing and have an impact on the body and just kind of one's general quality of life, and I've had the well spouse tell me that they feel really guilty. They may have feelings that they don't desire their spouse as much.

Treatment can impact someone's physical appearance. There can be weight gain and hair loss and just decreased energy and libido and sex drive and the well spouse is certainly going to be affected by that. And they say things like, "Oh, I just wish I wasn't even married," and feel extremely guilty about that. And I've had the experience sometimes that they've been carrying around that thought or feeling for awhile, but when they say it in therapy it sort of releases and it doesn't have the same power over them as it once had. They may not have even dreamed of saying that to a family member or a close friend or even their minister or in a support group. It's a very intimate thought.

Lee Rosen: Now, are you usually seeing the couple together or are you seeing the people individually?

David Garver: I've had experience with both. Again, people have come in with this as the issue; this is why they're coming in, when it's an individual. "I have an ill spouse and I want to learn how to cope with it better and work through some of the feelings that I'm having."

And for couples, they're coming in and they're wanting help working on it together so it doesn't serve as a wedge to come between them and drive them apart.

Lee Rosen: One thing that I'm sort of wondering -- and it's a little bit of a tangent, but I'm really curious -- do you feel like the doctors and the hospitals do a pretty good job of directing people to getting the help that they need with the relationships and their own emotions or are we still kind of in the Dark Ages on that?

David Garver: No, I wouldn't say we're in the Dark Ages. My experience has been the usual standard of care for hospitals now are to offer some sort of caregiver support group and the nursing staff and social workers are real valuable resources and they have handouts. And at the same time, that can feel really overwhelming. I mean, when is the well spouse going to have time to sit down and digest this information and kind of make sense out of it? But it's still a resource that's there.

Lee Rosen: Well what are the main pieces of advice that you like to give? Anything we haven't covered that when someone is working through this sort of issue and dealing with an illness, what are the main messages that you like to send and main things they need to work on and do?

David Garver: I really like to work with them on how to set a framework where they're working on this together. You know, normally when the ill spouse -- a lot of attention starts to center around the ill spouse and the well spouse goes into the real super caregiver mode and that works for a short time. But after awhile they're sort of still carrying all that burden and work that they feel they need to do and so it's about setting expectations and hopefully giving back responsibilities and activities that the ill spouse used to do so it's not continually on the well spouse.

Sometimes the well spouse feels like they need to follow up with the doctor's appointments and additional lab work and getting medications refilled and they want to make sure that their spouse is getting taken care of. But after awhile it can feel like there's this dynamic where now the ill spouse may feel like, "Oh, you're nagging me about taking my medication. I know." And that really just can get bigger and bigger and bigger if it's not addressed, again, within the framework of working on this together. What words can feel more supportive versus words that might feel more critical or nagging?

We do a lot of grief work, working with the loss of the future that they both had in mind. Depending on when this illness strikes, it can -- just the long-term implications of a couple who are newly married and early in life, maybe they were planning to have

children and now this illness, it's not going to be a possibility. So in addition to the illness, now they're really going to be grieving that loss of what they had hoped to experience together. We work through the feelings of anger and guilt and sadness, either expressed or unexpressed, that really zap the energy out of the relationship over time and I really try to refocus energies or efforts into other areas where the couple can come together, not feel like everything is organized around the illness.

When possible, working on things to help the couple reconnect, reestablish their relationship and increasing the emotional connectedness and intimacy. And intimacy is one of the things affected or it can be affected, so it's kind of reestablishing expectations around that and that just really takes time. And when necessary, making sure that their children's emotional needs are taken care of as well.

Lee Rosen: It's tough to keep the kids in mind when you've got so much else to deal with.

David Garver: That's correct.

Lee Rosen: Well David, I really appreciate you joining us today and walking us through the whole idea of how to cope with an illness in your marriage. It's fascinating to hear you talk about it and to come to better understand just the impact on every aspect of your life that the illness really has. So I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

David Garver: It's been my pleasure.

Lee Rosen: If you're interested in catching up with David, he practices in Charlotte, North Carolina and he can be reached at (704) 547-1483. We will, of course, put that information in the show notes on the website and I would like to thank you for joining us and for listening. I hope that you have gained something today that will help you. Whether it's an illness or any other issue in your marriage, I think David has really given us some good advice that we can put to work. I certainly have some ideas about things that I can do at home.

We would love to hear from you. If you have comments, our listener comment line is (919) 256-3083. Or feel free to email us at, comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Until next time, stay happily married.

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