

Workshop V DEALING WITH THE NASTIES (M. Allison Reeves, M.A., R.C.C. 818-0146)

The impact of chronic illness upon a couple can range from irritating, a nuisance that must be endured, to devastating. Frequently people ask:

One: Can I just ignore it and have it magically go away? For both people involved, this will strain the relationship and the health of both individuals. Small irritants can reach enormous proportions if they are ignored as assumptions and expectations are not examined and articulated. Both people become more distant as each tries to protect themselves and each other from concerns, worries, frustrations and fears. Why is it that so many people do this then? It's almost as if they are in shock; believe me this is very possible. Being gentle with yourselves as you grapple with this new arrival, illness, really helps.

Two: I can't just leave this person can I, s/he'd be helpless without me? Well yes you can but more importantly the issue is questioning the assumption that As/he'd be helpless without me. Invariably this is inaccurate. For the person living with the illness it does not help to have someone else always doing for them even if it can be a grateful relief and help from time to time. Taking on only the roles of caregiver or care receiver and no longer lover, partner, or spouse can quickly destroy an intimate relationship. It behooves you to discover and learn ways to live your lives as fully as possible. For the person witnessing, knowing when to help and when not to is difficult but overall very important. Remember relationships thrive when respect, support, and independence is valued and honoured.

Three: What about my dreams and my future? This is a good one to examine and discover ways in which you each can remain a vibrant part of the couple. I know this can be a difficult one; all sorts of feelings come up such as resentment, guilt, envy, anger, helplessness, and responsibility. However working this one through helps enormously. And it's never too late to begin satisfying this one.

Four: How can I ever tell what works and what doesn't? Welcome to the land of unpredictability and uncertainty. Not a pleasant place and one sure to create huge amounts of anxiety and fear. Flexibility and creativity are powerful assets. Both people will benefit from recognizing the knowledge that they already have available to them. Remember you each are your own best expert. The body is a great source of information. It is continually giving all of us up-to-date feedback. The idea is to listen to it. Simply notice and you will both learn what is helping and what is getting you into trouble more frequently than not: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This helps to bring some certainty back into your lives. Thinking of being in a new culture where neither of you know the language nor the customs really helps. Individually you can begin to blossom again. When we look at what works and what doesn't work in the relationship, know that re-negotiation on a continual basis is key. Illness is present now and it wasn't before. Like us, illness changes over time and circumstances. Becoming better communicators, developing and strengthening boundaries, and discovering what you can share joyfully can be fun, arduous, irritating, and very worthwhile.

In conclusion, I would like to recommend creating the most unhealthy environment for the illness as possible. If this means taking care of you better, great. If this means saying no to some things and yes to others, super. If this means bringing peace into your lives, wonderful. Living with chronic illness can be so frustrating and arduous that it really is delightful to discover we can feel better despite its presence.