

Half-SELF

Living and loving through chronic illness

No one considers the effects of chronic illness on their relationship, but those who live with illness can tell you there is a big change. The sooner couples talk about their fear, anger, confusion and guilt, the more support and increase in intimacy they'll experience. Sharing these feelings and concerns with your partner helps you and your partner feel more like a team and draws you closer. Infertility, impotence, a colostomy bag, the loss of a breast or in the case of Multiple Sclerosis, not being able to feel or move your legs contribute to feelings of being only half a person. The scars of the disease on the outside are many times minor compared to the scars left inside. It takes a loving partner to understand that illness is a temporary detour where adjustments need to be made in the way you express your love.

Completely withdrawing love or affection leads to depression or feelings of hopelessness.

You may feel isolated or embarrassed because when asked how you're feeling the expected "I'm fine" isn't fine at all on the inside. Intimacy and sex are never something that should be avoided among couples, healthy or not. All humans enjoy and need intimacy to feel healthy and loved. These feelings help overcome the obstacles that chronic illness often inflicts. As you become more confident in your ability to express your feelings of love to your partner, I encourage you to seek continued counseling with a therapist of your choice.

SHARE THE DIAGNOSIS. This simply means that you talk to your spouse and say that you are a team. Anything that affects your spouse's well-being will affect yours. This makes the patient feel loved and more confident with being able to endure the illness. It also provides an opportunity for you to help with routine care that may be necessary during this time.

INTIMACY TAKES ONLY MINUTES. Rather than thinking about a vacation or getaway, take advantage of "mini vacations." Take advantage of moments you can be close, by holding hands, watching a funny movie, cuddling on the sofa, listening to old songs together or talking to one another. Many times, these are "miracle moments" that life's busy pace robbed from you before the illness.

REDISCOVER THE JOYS OF TOUCH. With chronic illness, skin sensations change. Chemotherapy, for example, can heighten sensitivity of the skin, whereas M.S. can deaden it. Take time to rediscover each other's touch and allow your partner to set the pace.

START IN THE TUB OR SHOWER. Most of us are comfortable in warm water as it relaxes us and takes some of

our pain away. Sitting in the tub with the one you love is an opportunity to relax, look at each other's face, and talk. Washing each other's back or feet is also a wonderful way to express love and intimacy to your partner. Many times, it is the intimate setting of a bath where partners are permitted to see and touch scars. Your reaction will mean everything, and the best reaction is to thank your partner for showing you and reassure the person that the scar makes you love him or her more.

The loss of a breast, body part, or one's mobility is symbolic of a loss of independence and sometimes identity. The partner is often the most influential in determining how well his or her spouse deals with chronic illness. No one wants a partner to suffer, but if they do, remind yourself that you and you alone may provide the emotional healing your partner needs to reclaim his or her sexual and intimate self. ♡



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