

"My husband just sits and looks out the window. I really miss talking to him about so many things we used to share."

Intimacy in Caregiving

Those in a partner relationship may find themselves caring for each other more and more as needs change. Or sometimes one partner becomes more dependent and the healthier partner becomes the primary caregiver. In either situation, the couple relationship may be impacted.

As dependency increases, couples often report changes in both the emotional and physical aspects of their relationships. In cases of dementia, the person you spent your life with may no longer seem to be present.

Some feelings that may occur are:

- Missing the ability to have one special person to talk to and share feelings.
- Losing dreams and plans for the future.
- Losing the security of the long term partnership.
- Missing the physical intimacy of the relationship.

Sometime these changes can lead to conflict if there is a change in responsibilities for tasks or roles within the couple relationship. This may cause a power struggle when the dependent partner is reluctant to turn over responsibilities such as handling finances or decision making. Or it may be difficult to take on a task where there is limited experience, such as preparing meals or doing laundry.

Here are some tips to help deal with such situations:

- Include the care receiver in decision making whenever possible.
- Encourage the care receiver to do as much as possible. Avoid taking over tasks until necessary.
- Practice honest and open communication.

Changes in physical intimacy of the couple's relationship are often difficult to discuss. But as the physical and mental health of one partner changes, it can affect the physical relationship.

The healthier partner may not worry about renewing physical intimacy due to fear of hurting the dependent partner. This is especially true where chronic pain is an issue. Or they might worry that a partner who has dementia may not be aware and consenting to physical intimacy. In some cases the care receiver may not recognize their partner. This can be very difficult for the caregiver.

What changes do you see in your own couple relationship?

Here are a few tips for handling changes in emotional and physical aspects of a couple relationship:

- Continue to talk and make decisions together when possible.
- Include both partners in activities you have enjoyed as a couple as long as possible.
- Find someone to talk to about your feelings. This might be a family member or friend or you may prefer to talk to a counselor or clergy.
- Attend a support group for caregivers in similar situations. It can be helpful to know you are not alone in your feelings.
- Talk to a physician or counselor about your situation when concerned about physical intimacy.
- Hugs and gentle touch are important even when the care receiver is not able to participate in more physical aspects of the couple relationship.

I can take these steps to feel better about my relationship with my partner.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Notes: _____

The following organizations may have helpful information:

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

This tip sheet is part of a series:

Caregiving Relationships: For People Who Care for Adults

University of Illinois Extension, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Information in this publication is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names do not constitute an endorsement and do not imply discrimination against similar products.

Issued in furtherance of cooperative Extension Service work, Acts of May 8 and June 20, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunity in programs and employment.

Copyright © 2001 by the University of Illinois Board of Trustees.

Authors and publishers have granted permission for copies of this work or parts of this work to be reproduced, provided that (1) copies are distributed at or below the cost of reproduction; (2) the author, the publication, and the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences and the relevant division within the college are identified; and (3) proper notice of copyright is affixed to each copy.

Created 2019