

“I need to do things for my mother. That doesn’t leave much time for my husband. I just don’t have the energy to do the things that we used to do together. I sometimes feel like I am losing touch with him.”

Nurturing Couple Relationships

Caregivers frequently find it challenging to balance the caregiving responsibilities with time for other family members. Responsibilities for parents, children and partners are squeezing caregivers who are in the “sandwich generation.” Demands on the caregiver may leave little time and energy for partners.

Many caregivers say they gain strength for caregiving from personal relationships. A positive relationship with a partner and children is beneficial in reducing personal stress, managing the many tasks and providing emotional support.

Here are some ways that caregivers can nurture their relationships with a partner and children:

Make It an Intergenerational Experience

Include your whole family to give you more time to spend with your partner. Everyone benefits.

- Exchange responsibilities with other family members. Give yourself and your daughter a break. You care for the baby while she visits her grandmother.
- Involve children and grandchildren. Reading or playing games with the older family members is fun for both generations.
- Ask your partner to spend time with you and the older family member.

Express Your Need For Help

Ask siblings or other family members to care for your parent so you can have some couple time.

- Use an I statement. Say, “I can’t do that today but I can later this week.”
- Let others know what tasks need to be done. Family members may be willing to help if they know what to do.

I will do this to make more time for my partner:

Maintain Your Couple Relationship

- Make time for fun, even if it is just a few minutes. Laughing and having fun with your partner is a bonding experience. It helps us get over the bumps and disappointments that most days offer.
- Snuggle. Spend a few minutes just snuggling and feeling close. It will boost the feeling of togetherness.
- Learn about the illness together. It helps you stay connected as you prepare for the future.
- Talk about your feelings and the things that are happening. Create time for yourself.
- Allow yourself time to transition from being a caregiver to being a partner. This is often a solitary activity like reading the paper, exercising or walking.

Be Aware of Harmful Communication Patterns

1. Escalation. Your conversation begins calmly but erupts with negativity and becomes out of control.
2. Negative Interpretation. Things that are said are viewed as negative comments.
3. Invalidation/Put-downs. Feelings, thoughts and opinions are ignored or ridiculed. Sometimes this is subtle, a raised eyebrow or smirk. Other times this is spoken.
4. Withdrawal/Avoidance. One person refuses to discuss the issue that is important to the other person.

I will strengthen my couple relationship by:

How do I avoid harmful communication?

For more information please read:

Fighting For Your Marriage- 3rd Edition by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley and Susan L. Blumberg, Jossey Bass Publishers, 2010.

This tip sheet is part of a series:

Caregiving Relationships: For People Who Care for Adults

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