

“TIL DEATH DO US PART”

When dealing with a terminal illness, or even a chronic illness, the words “to death do us part” take on a new meaning. This is especially true in cases that involve the illnesses that tear a person down over a long period of time. Physically, these illnesses are extremely hard on the person who has them. BUT, we need to remember that it is also as hard on those who are close to them, especially family members. Watching someone you love slowly deteriorate, while at the same time having to take on a new role as a caregiver for them, can be devastating. In many cases, such as my own, the person who you are caring for is your spouse, the person who you planned to spend the rest of your life with, the person who you have raised children with and watched them move on to a life of their own, the person who at one time or other has probably cared for you while you fought an illness or an injury.

People often ask me why I title this article “Til Death Do Us Part.” That’s easy. Forty-eight years ago Harriet and I stood in front of a preacher, in front of all of our friends and family members, and promised to “have and to hold, for better or worse, in sickness and health, til death do us part.” We took those words seriously, and still do. I have survived stage 4 esophageal cancer with her support and care; a heart attack with her support and care; and pneumonia with her support and care, along with several of the lesser illnesses that we all get. How could I possibly abandon her now after all the support she has given me?

Let me digress for a moment and give you a little history of our battle with Huntington’s Disease. Harriet’s mother was diagnosed with it in the mid 1980’s, and passed on in 1994. The strain of HD that she had was extremely strong, and all five of her children were found to have it, including Harriet. Harriet was the oldest of the five, so we expected that she would probably be the first to pass on from the HD, but one of her sisters and one of her brothers are already gone. Why then is she still here? There are two reasons for that. First, she has had some awesome doctors who really know this disease, and they have put her on the most up to date drugs, which have controlled it so far, to a point. Second, between me and our daughters she has had a strong support system. It is amazing what can happen when a family works together.

The question that usually comes to mind at this point is “what’s it like to be caregiver for someone with such a devastating illness?” Well, I’m not going to say that it isn’t that bad, or that it is easy, because in truth it is a tough ride. Harriet is one of the most compassionate and intelligent women that I know. She went

through high school and college with straight A's, always on the dean's list. She has been by my side helping other couples through some rough times, and has opened our home to several of them. She helped both of our daughters during the early years of their marriages while they were still working, by watching their children while they were at work. She has helped me run some small businesses that we have had, cared for me while I was ill, helped care for my parents, and has just always been there for anyone that needed help. Now it is her turn to receive help while she struggles with this disease. The drugs she is on aren't "curing" her disease, but they are controlling its progress to a point. Our oldest daughter lives nearby and helps me as much as she can even though she has her own family to care for. Some of our close neighbors are very supportive.

You see, "IT REALLY IS ALL ABOUT SUPPORT." I have written several papers on how to build a strong support system, because when you are fighting these major illnesses, especially those that are terminal in nature, the more support you can get or provide, the better.