

Relationship Advice: Supporting the Caregiver



 By Dr. Jane Greer

Dealing with an illness or injury is stressful and overwhelming, and that is even more true during a global pandemic. When it happens, family members and friends rally around the person who is sick, and the focus is on them as they deal with doctors, getting a diagnosis, managing symptoms, and so much more. While that is happening, their partner often becomes a hands-on caregiver, arranging appointments, transportation, in-home care, and dealing with all sorts of other logistics. Their strength and stamina can be instrumental in helping their loved one get through the difficult time. Katharine Heigl, the star of *Firefly Lane*, recently revealed her husband Josh Kelley helped her get through a health crisis. “First trip since the start of the pandemic is back to L.A. to deal with a herniated disk in my neck,” Heigl captioned with an Instagram video of Kelley singing along with the coffee maker in their hotel room. “Thank God for @joshbk Kelley for not only coming with me to hold my hand but for providing me with some very much needed comedic relief!” And while caring for the person who is unwell is so important, the thing that can fall through the cracks is the impact all of this has on the partner who has stepped into that helping role. Illness can hit hard, not just for the one who is sick but also for the one who is going through it with them. Since they don’t want to be a burden and possibly add more stress to their loved one who is healing, they may be reluctant to voice their worry and unhappiness, as well as the strain they are experiencing, and may even think they shouldn’t.

If you find yourself in this position, what can you do to make sure you are getting what you need so you don't burn out and can continue to be there for the person who relies on you?

When you are dealing with illness and recovery in your family, the uncertainty and anxiety you feel can totally drain you, as can the intense demands that are being put on you. Your ailing partner is likely not themselves, so your own support system is no longer in place and you probably miss them. You're likely to be very concerned about when and if they will return to what they once were. When this happens, it is normal to feel unsupported, angry, overwhelmed, frightened, overloaded, and even alone, all of which can make you experience guilt for having these feelings since the person you love is suffering. They can get even worse if your partner becomes demanding, takes you for granted, or are unpleasant to be around because of the pain or discomfort they are dealing with. Also, their fear about the future can put even more of a damper on the household. You may begin to resent having to carry the lion's share of the daily household work in addition to everything else you are handling, and then think you are not being a good enough partner because if you are the healthy one, you may feel you have no right to complain.

With all of this in mind, it is important to take stock of how depleted you are. While you are serving as the emotional and physical pillar in your home at the moment, you, too, need someone to lean on. Consider finding someone who can give you the emotional support you require without feeling it is taking away from your partner's needs. In other words, your partner's

family members may not be the best people to look toward. Instead, think about a friend, a neighbor, a colleague at work who is removed enough from the situation that you won't feel terrible if you share with them the occasional thought that your loved one is driving you crazy, or a therapist. Being able to say it out loud can be very helpful, because otherwise you will bottle it up and it can just get worse. Having an individual in your corner who can listen and understand how hard this is for you, too, will allow you to recharge your battery so you can be there for your partner. Along those lines, if you are aware of a friend or family member who is in the role of caring for an ill loved one, consider reaching out and offering your empathy and a shoulder to lean on – it will go a long way.

It sounds like Katharine and Josh are getting through their crisis together. Humor seems to be one of the ingredients Josh is using to support Katharine, and hopefully he, too, is getting the assistance he needs so he can continue to be there for his wife.

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