

**ASK Dr. Avie** A MAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THINGS WOMEN CARE ABOUT  
with Avie J. Rainwater, III, PhD, ABPP

## In Sickness and In Health

We've all heard the jokes. When a woman is sick, she trudges forward and continues to take care of everything. But, when a man gets sick, he lies on the sofa, moaning like a child. Why do we think that's funny? Well, partly because it's so very true! Now, don't get me wrong. Most of the time, men go to work (even though ill) and push through. But, when illness does get the best of us, we just fall apart. Why don't women do this? They can't, simply put, because it is still the woman/the mom/the wife who runs the family.

So, what happens to a family and a marriage when a woman becomes seriously ill? Undoubtedly, the husband will react in fear. He will be afraid because he loves his wife and is concerned for her health. He will be terrified because he has no idea how to pick up all the pieces she is holding together for the family. This fear will manifest itself in one of two ways: fix it or ignore it. First, and most likely, this man - scared out of his mind - will swing into "fix it" mode. Why? Because that's what men are socialized to do: fix the problem. It's why we drive women crazy by offering solutions to problems they only want to share with us, not have us fix. "Fixing it" may manifest itself by urging second and third opinions, tirelessly searching the Internet for miracle cures, researching what has worked for other patients, or similar actions. This can be infuriating for the woman who is already sick.

Alternatively, he could come across as detached or marginally interested or not wanting to talk about it at all. This is the retreat/ignore reaction. Ladies, you need to realize this isn't done to hurt you. It's probably not even a conscious decision. This man who loves you can't easily face the fact that you are ill. You've always "soldiered through" when you were sick in the past, and he imagines you'll just do the same again. Subconsciously he can't accept the gravity of a serious, much less life-threatening, diagnosis. The prospects of losing you are just too overwhelming. Sure, he may come off as stoic, but inside he's terrified! Again, you will probably feel infuriated.

**"He will be terrified because he has no idea how to pick up all the pieces she is holding together for the family."**

So, what are you (the patient) to do, now that you're sick and you're furious with your yet-ineffectual husband? It's really much simpler than it might seem. Sit him down. Explain to him that your best chance at recovery is to focus on yourself and getting better. Explain - in detail - all the loose pieces he is going to have to juggle for you while you heal. Give him a list, a schedule. Tell him where things are located that he'll need. Write out the grocery list by aisles in the grocery store. Tell him when each bill needs to be paid. Leave no stone unturned. There's one more thing he'll need: your confidence. He might not express it very much, but he likely counts on you as his main cheerleader, his encourager, and the one who

has his back. So, he'll need to know that you know he can do this. When faced with a hard task, most men do rather well if they know specifically what to do and are encouraged to take on the challenge.

Sure, it's not like you don't need encouragement yourself. You do. But just give him a loving nod to get him started, and you'll see that he can rise to the occasion. Even though you (as mom/wife/ruler-of-the-home-universe) are the one who is ill, you must recruit and secure your husband to look at the reality of the situation and fill in the blank spaces. Without such a team effort, the risks are great. A landmark study in the journal *CANCER* found women who were told they had a serious illness were seven times as likely to become separated or divorced as men with similar health problems. When the man became ill, only three percent experienced the end of a marriage. But among women, about twenty-one percent became separated or divorced. Among couples who split up, divorce occurred (on average) about six months after the diagnosis, although there was wide variability in the timing. Patients who lose spousal support after a cancer diagnosis are less likely to complete therapy or try new treatments. They have higher rates of hospitalization and lower rates of hospice care. Thus, you and your husband getting on the same page may literally save your life and the life of your marriage.

If your husband falters, you must seek immediate psychological support in the form of marital therapy to help him get on board. He will likely not do this on his own. If he wavers still, then the therapy will need to change to individual therapy (to help you cope) and family therapy to help you and your children deal with your illness... and the threats to the family. You need to surround yourself with the best support and care that is possible - a good medical team, peace that your husband is taking care of the family, the support of a good psychologist (if needed), and the loving attention and prayers of friends and family. With that combination, you will be able to put all of your energies into getting better.

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