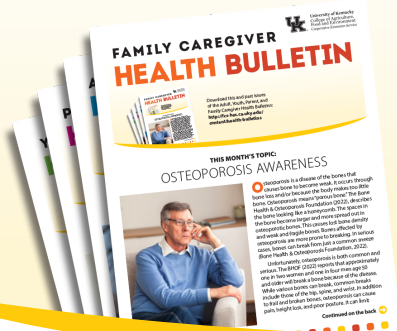


FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



FEBRUARY 2025

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH: CARING FOR AN AGING SPOUSE OR PARTNER



Caring for an aging spouse or partner has its challenges, mainly when the health of one or both partners declines. It is not rare for older couples touched by issues of health and aging to reexamine their relationship expectations.

When a spouse becomes a caregiver for their partner, it is common for one or both partners to have many feelings.

- **Guilt.** The caregiver feels guilt for being the “healthy” one, and the care receiver may feel guilt for being a burden.
- **Anger.** One or both partners may feel angry that they have been robbed of a healthy lifespan and may not be able to do things they had planned.
- **Resentfulness.** The caregiver may feel like the act of caring is taking over the relationship and they are being overlooked or ignored.

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- **Depression.** Both spouses are at risk of depression because of fear and worry over things like loss of freedom, pain, money stress, anticipatory grief, loss, role shifts, social comparison to other couples who do not have health problems, etc.
- **Unpreparedness.** Shifts in health and relationships can happen quickly. This might leave little time to plan for the mental toll of health decline and caregiving.

What can you do to prepare for times of sickness?

- **Talk.** When couples start out, it is common to talk about career, housing, and family, but it may not be a priority to think or talk about life in old age. But you should have this conversation. You also need to revisit it to help plan for a time when health fails and you need caregiving for one or both partners. Sharing both care and end-of-life wishes is vital

Don't be afraid or ashamed to ask for help. Help could be family members, friends, neighbors, faith-based groups, volunteer and/or paid services.

because it stresses personal values and helps caregivers make better choices. This deep level of connection fosters trust and closeness.

- **Accept change.** A changed relationship can cause grief. Take time to process the change and new roles and duties that

may result. Talk to family and friends about your situation and any sorrow you may feel. Think about talking to a health-care expert or support group.

- **Teach yourself.** Learn about your partner's health issue(s), outlook, treatment, and choices. Ask their health-care provider questions. Check with trusted health websites and disease-specific groups. Local support groups can also offer educational support.
- **Share decision-making.** Talk about treatment choices and health-care decisions as a team.
- **Respect wishes.** Both partners need to set limits that respect wishes and ability.
- **Ask for help.** As caregiving tasks build, you might not be able to do it alone. Don't be

afraid or ashamed to ask for help. Help could be family members, friends, neighbors, faith-based groups, volunteer and/or paid services.

- **Take rest.** Rest gives you time to recharge, even if it is just for a short time.
- **Keep up your partner's dignity.** When fitting and appropriate, involve an aging or ill partner in decision-making about daily living and care. When you're able, give your partner tasks to help them feel a sense of purpose, value, and success. Remember that your partner is not a disease or health issue. Your partner is a living person with unique needs, life experiences, and identity.
- **Stop blame.** Do not judge or blame your partner for their situation.
- **Stay positive.** A good frame of mind lowers stress, helps strength, and adds to a caregiver's ability to handle challenging situations. A good outlook adds to total well-being, quality of life, and relationships.
- **Be loving and keep your connection.** Make room in your life to be partners, friends, and lovers. Do loving things like you did before the disease, even if you must alter it to the present situation. Date nights might change into movie nights at home or listening to a book, for example. Celebrate anniversaries, honor traditions, write love letters. If possible, keep up a physical and/or loving relationship. Thank each other for both the big and little things.

Do not let age or sickness rock the basis of your union. When prepared, loyal partners can work together through challenging health situations.

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