

## Relationship Challenges (2): How to keep your relationship strong whilst caring for ageing parents

Following on from my previous blog focusing on a relationship challenge where one partner wants to leave - in this blog I want to focus on the challenges that couples can go through when either one or both partners need to care for ageing parents.

Many couples I see in my practice struggle with being part of the sandwich generation where they are having to manage ageing parents at the same time as working and raising children. Add the arrival of a pandemic into the mix has meant these issues have been highlighted. Saying it's been difficult and tough is an understatement. Often unable to visit care homes or hospitals and parents who may be far away suffering with serious health problems, has led to further stress and anxiety and all kinds of new demands for a couple relationship.

Clients often express feelings of being pulled in so many directions which can bring up lots of difficult emotions and put a strain on a relationship.

If you don't live close by, how much time is taken up worrying about how they are coping and feeling guilty because there is not enough time to visit more often.

A client told me that during lockdown he lived in a permanent state of anxiety, waiting for the phone call in the middle of the night from a parent saying that they had had a fall or there's been an accident.

Caring for an elderly parent can be stressful and difficult beyond belief especially if there are unresolved issues between you from the past which can have added implications on partners and families.

How we respond to ageing parents is often based on our attachment styles. John Bowlby understood the importance of the crucial bond that develops between young children and their caregivers and between adults and their relationship partner, close relatives and friends. He said the need for relationship bonds follow us from "the cradle to the grave."

What was your experience of attachment patterns as a child, for example was it a secure and safe place within which to grow or was there a lot of anxiety around, leading to an anxious/preoccupied attachment or was it an avoidant attachment?

Many adult children often grapple with the difficult decision of whether to or how to care for parents who were unsupportive, neglectful and/or abusive. It's not always easy to find that love and care and be generous when you didn't receive it as a child. Resentments and anger feelings towards parents often show up directed at our partners.

These situations can be very stressful for a couple and often talking through issues from the past with an experienced counsellor can help you arrive at the right decisions for you.

Even if you may have had great parents who spent most of their lives caring for you and now need that extra support, it's not always easy to find that love, care and generosity when there may be so many demands going on for you that another becomes overwhelming. Helping a child through a difficult time at school, dealing with mental health issues, moving house, financial or relationship issues or simply going through the menopause yourself. All these requests on your time take away time from the couple relationship.

So how does a partner give continual support at these crucial times when it feels there is constant competition for attention and care is going elsewhere?

### **Suggestions for keeping a relationship strong whilst caring for ageing parents**

**Making sure your partner is always a priority.** Don't bottle things up and feel you should cope on your own. When stressed there is a tendency to think we have no time to talk about our feelings and we tend to bottle things up and then it only needs a little something that results in a blow-up. Make time to regularly check in with your partner. Don't give up on keeping your relationship top priority. Often partners can feel they are completely overlooked at this time as all the energy and life that was the marriage now goes elsewhere.

### **No topic is off limits – you are a team**

It's important we feel supported by our partners during these crucial times in a relationship. It's important to feel it's a safe place to talk about anything with your partner and trust each other. Just feeling you have that space to talk about how you feel, without feeling judged or needing a partner to problem solve. If you are being talked to make sure you are really listening so your partner feels that you are there for them. The marriage can get into trouble when both parties aren't on the same page.

### **Don't be afraid to ask for help**

make sure you give yourself time to find out all the help there is out there from your GP, social services, carers associations and occupational therapists. You may need your partners help with this.

### **You can't do it all**

If you are a person who finds it difficult to ask for help or feels you are always the responsible one in the family having to do it all – you will find yourself overwhelmed. When a crisis hits, there is the tendency to go around like a headless chicken as you try to come to terms with the changes in your family dynamic. This is not the time to shut everybody out but the time to reach out to your partner, siblings and friends. Often a problem shared is a problem halved

### **Keep things simple**

Simple, loving gestures matter a great deal in a relationship and never more so when we feel overwhelmed when caring for others. Try to show an act of kindness or love every day, even if that's ordering their favourite take-away or reaching for a hug. Acknowledge them for something they've done and let them know how much you care.

### **Self-care**

Meeting the needs of an ageing parent can lead to continual exhaustion and frustration. Try to keep doing what you were always doing. Clients have expressed their sense of guilt when they make time for their yoga class, or a night out with friends, feeling they should be spending it instead with their ageing parent. Make sure you look after your mental and physical health by getting enough sleep, exercising and eating properly is so important. You may not be able to do it with the same frequency but stopping your exercise routines, your coffee with friends and short breaks with your partner will NOT enable you to face this role reversal and cherish every moment with a parent whilst you can. If you can't look after yourself, it's hard to look after others.

Caring for a parent can be one of the most challenging situations we face. Prioritise your marriage so you can stay strong together throughout the caregiving experience.

I sign off with this quote from Tia Walker

*"In the heart of every caregiver is a knowing that we are all connected. As I do for you, I do for me."*

**Dawn Kaffel**

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or (020) 8959 9528. Alternatively, you can contact me by email: [dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com](mailto:dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com).

**Dawn Kaffel**