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COUPLES' TRIALS EXPERIENCE & ADVICE

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Although breast cancer is primarily a woman's disease, she doesn't have to face it alone.

Fighting the disease as a couple is an experience in itself, and can only make you and your husband closer and your bond stronger. Here, couples who know give tips on how to get through the difficult experience.

Be There for Her

Anne and Kirby Best battled breast cancer together and have since co-founded [DryDreams Sleepwear](#), which manufactures sweat-wicking sleepwear for women and men. A full 100 percent of the proceeds benefit cancer research organizations.

As they look back, they say husbands must remember a few important things when their wives have breast cancer. "A husband should know that his wife is facing a paralyzing fear of the unknown. Initially, you just picture the cancer growing and winning, and that fear begins to subside only as each medical milestone becomes a reality," Anne says. Soothing words from Kirby during this time, for instance, let Anne know that, not only was he on her side, but he also wasn't going anywhere. "This made an enormous difference in how I was able to tackle the treatment and the aftermath. So husbands, let your wives know you're there for them in every way," Anne adds.

Bill Parness' late wife Laura inspired him to establish a program in partnership with St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in New York called [Laura's Journeys](#), which encourages and facilitates recreational travel for patients dealing with cancer or other serious chronic diseases. "Your wife needs you now more than ever," he advises. "Make yourself an active partner in her treatment plan and, if possible, go to all appointments. But also, be there for her psychologically. Make her feel that she's still the most gorgeous, desirable woman in the world. Buy her flowers regularly and, when you can, jewelry or some other trinket that will make her feel special.

"Of course, there will be some days when it's best to just get out of her way. Still, going the extra mile for your wife truly can make a difference and will be appreciated. The best rewards during those years was finding little notes in my dresser drawers from Laura saying how much she loved me," Bill recalls. "To this day, I unfold those notes and smile."

Divide and Conquer

Anne and Kirby say picking roles and focusing are important. "Right away, we recognized that it was important to determine what we are each comfortable with and more skilled at handling, and stay within those zones. We developed a divide-and-conquer approach. I was the medical researcher and primary interface with the doctors. Kirby took charge of all insurance matters and was the 'impartor of information.' He told people I had breast cancer and, during the yearlong treatment process, he sent email progress reports," Anne recalls.

"The last thing I wanted was to have Anne lose her focus on the battle at hand by being immersed in the red tape surrounding a diagnosis, so I acted as the point person in all insurance and financial decisions. And while on an emotional level I felt we were *both* diagnosed, I knew it was important that I remained clear-headed when it came to the paperwork and reaching out to our circle of friends about Anne's progress," Kirby adds.

Remember that Knowledge is Power

Couples face a lot of unexpected issues during diagnosis and treatment, and facing challenges head on is important. "I'm not sure if we were prepared for the number of challenges that extended beyond the medical side of things. It is a stream of fears, frustrations, questions, disappointments and victories," says Anne. "To help us get through this, we relied on two elements: Facts and humor. I read everything I could get my hands on about breast cancer and became an amateur oncologist overnight. The saying that knowledge is power is absolutely true, and I can't stress enough the importance of knowing as much as you can about what lies ahead."

Accept Offers of Help

Your loved ones will most likely offer help and want to do meaningful things to assist you. Although that can make a huge difference for you and your family, accept only the offers that actually do help -- not those that can stress you out. "We had four young children at home, so we wanted to maintain as normal a life as possible. While we felt it best to respectfully decline offers of food and other tangible items, we gratefully accepted things like helping to drive our kids to sports practices, coming by to play bridge all weekend or just taking a long walk. While it's very hard to turn down someone's generosity, it's important to draw some lines. Friends understand," Anne says. "Break the ice and ask for a favor if you need it. It could be something very small, but it gives someone the opportunity to get involved. Surrounding ourselves with positive energy was so important. And not just for us, but for our friends, as well," explains Kirby.

Finding the Right Doctor

Work with a doctor who you trust and with whom you're comfortable. "Find a doctor who makes you feel as if you are part of a team -- one who exudes knowledge, confidence and honesty, but also listens and makes you feel empowered. We were truly blessed to have that in Dr Gabriel Sara, who actively encouraged our travels and, most importantly, worked with us on a treatment plan that gave Laura a remarkable quality of life for those six years," Bill explains.

Minimize Stress

"While your wife is obviously bearing the brunt of this, these are going to be very stressful times for you as well. Do what you can to alleviate that stress, whether it is playing ball or some other form of exercise, playing a musical instrument or hanging out with your kids or friends," says Bill. "Finally, don't be a martyr. If friends or family offer help with meals or other things, accept it."

Live Your Life

Life doesn't stop just because you're experiencing changes. "As long as your spouse feels up to it, go out for dinner, to movies or shows, or to visit with family or friends. It was not uncommon for Laura and me to stay in Manhattan after her treatments for dinner and a Broadway show. Of course, also make it a priority to travel -- whether it be a weekend getaway or a more elaborate trip," adds Bill.

Travel if Possible

Bill emphasizes that traveling can do wonders. "The planning and preparation took our minds off medical issues and gave us something to look forward to. Knowing that we would be going away in a few months made it easier for her to cope with the side effects of the more difficult rounds of chemo -- there was always light at the end of the tunnel," Bill recalls. "Once away, we were like romantic newlyweds again, exploring new places, relaxing, and enjoying meals alone, with family members, or with friends. We came home refreshed, ready to tackle the next round of treatments, and looking forward to planning our next trip. Most importantly, Laura always felt great when we were away. To put it in her own words: 'I felt like a *normal person*, not like someone battling a disease.'"

Be Prepared

As tough as it is, Anne asserts that you should prepare for the worst. "Expect that each test may yield bad news. Anticipate every side effect of your treatments. Clear your calendar of responsibilities. If you are ready for each possible negative, then you will likely have many small victories along the way," she says. And during that time, husbands should be there for their wives and change along with them.

"I do think it's very important for husbands to modify their behavior to suit their wives' needs. If she wants to be a 'control freak,' then support her decisions while gently offering guidance. If she wants to abdicate control, then step up with certainty," suggests Kirby. "Breast cancer is a life-changing event for everyone involved, but no one is more important than the person who has been diagnosed. It has to be all about *her*."