

HELP!

**DISABILITY
PRESSURES OUR
MARRIAGE**

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INTRODUCTION

Changes in life can come about unexpectedly, and these changes often bring pressure with them. This is certainly true in the world of disability. Maybe you were shocked by news that your newborn, or soon-to-be-born child, had a disability. Or perhaps you were hit with the news that your spouse's injury was going to have permanent consequences. Maybe your "new normal" has become so consuming that you are beginning to realize that something else is suffering as well: your marriage.

Perhaps you picked up this little book because you feel that so much attention has been concentrated on the physical care associated with disability that you and your spouse are not as close as you used to be. You have been increasingly irritable with each other, or worse, maybe angry fights have erupted. It could be that one of you is even considering leaving the marriage because

this is not how you envisioned your life.

Do any of the following describe your marriage?

- » Financial pressures seem overwhelming.
- » You feel ignored by your husband or wife.
- » There's little or no time for your sexual relationship. Maybe it's no longer even a possibility, due to new physical limitations.
- » Disagreements about how to discipline your child with disabilities, or your other children, arise frequently.
- » You are exhausted and discouraged by the unending care that disability requires.

These realities raise some important questions. Is it possible to have a close and healthy marriage, now that caring for your spouse or child with a disability has become the focus of life? Is it possible for your marriage even to improve due to the disability? The answer to both questions is “yes.” But how is this possible?

Marital joy, success, and stability are all possible because there is Someone who makes a difference. This is incredibly good news! A relationship with Jesus Christ makes healthy relationships possible, even in the midst of intense pressure. In other words, since Jesus is the Preeminent One, he can

change or stabilize the climate in your home if you walk with him by faith.

Essentially, that is what this mini-book is about. Therefore, my purpose is threefold: to take an honest look at how disability pressures marriage, to examine the deepest desires of the heart which such pressures often reveal, and to provide hope by showing how the Lord provides strength and help through his always-relevant Word.

Unexpected and Intense Pressure

As a pastor, I am privileged to shepherd many couples whose marriages are being pressured and changed by disability. Since disability enters families in myriad ways, it's impossible to address any one way in specific detail. However, perhaps you can relate to elements in one or more of the following real-life stories.

John and Amanda woke up one morning not knowing that in a few hours their lives would change forever. It was impossible for them to foresee John having the accident which severed his spinal cord and left him paralyzed. This change immediately placed significant financial burdens upon them, creating many related pressures. Their house needed major alterations to make it wheelchair accessible, and they also needed a vehicle upgrade. In particular, however, these changes impacted their marriage. In one conversation which remains vivid in my mind, Amanda agonized and, in tears, revealed to me one

of her fears: “What we’ve had [referring to their physical intimacy] will never be the same again.”

Tony and Jo thought life was wonderful when they brought Rhonda home from the hospital. She was a beautiful baby and looked perfectly healthy. However, they soon began to wonder if something might be wrong. Jo describes those days:

Rhonda looked so normal lying there amongst the toys and other paraphernalia of a newborn’s room. But I soon realized that every time I would check on her, she would be in exactly the same position I had originally put her in. . . .

Many nights during those first months, I would get out of bed and stand over Rhonda’s crib praying that she would wake up and begin crying and demanding attention. She would rarely cry. When she did there were never any tears. She never cried when she wanted to be fed or have her diaper changed. Nothing about her development was normal.¹

Little did Tony and Jo realize the pressures that the needs of their precious little girl would bring into their marriage.

Jane, a fellow-pastor's wife of twenty-five years, had major intestinal surgery just three years into marriage. Life has never been the same since she had her colostomy. Now, when they sleep, she has to have IVs drip liquids into her body, since her digestive system can barely absorb fluid. Part of my friend's daily routine is now caring for his wife.

When they stood at the marriage altar, none of these couples knew what was to come. None of them knew they would either become 24/7 caregivers or needing that care themselves—but God did. For all of them, their marriage vows, “For better, for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part,” have taken on new, pointed, realistic meaning.

Common Concerns

While writing this mini-book, I interviewed several couples. Marriage already has enough stress even when disability is not present, but it was easy for me to see how tense things can get when additional pressures are added. Here are some of the common concerns I heard.

DISAGREEMENT OVER CHILD-DISCIPLINE ISSUES

Andrew and Rachel's son was born with two special conditions: he is blind and he has a rare

skin condition. When I asked them what the biggest strain on their marriage was, they replied,

It's been deciding the best way to discipline our son. As much as we try to work together and be firm in our discipline decisions, we often compromise and use the excuse that he cannot see.

Rachel said she tends to let things go because she feels sorry for him because he has a disability. She added,

This has led to arguments between Andrew and me because now Jayden is being allowed to get away with things he really should not be doing. It is very easy to [impede] a child with special needs and let him or her run the parents and make their own rules.²

Maybe, like Rachel and Andrew, you and your spouse do not see eye-to-eye on how firm to be with your child who has a disability. Perhaps the discipline of your other children is being neglected because the care associated with your child who has a disability is so consuming.

IRRITABILITY AND LACK OF PHYSICAL INTIMACY

Other couples confessed that it is easy to be irritable with their other children and with each other because of how time-consuming the care of their disabled child has become. Along with this are sexual pressures and, in general, a lack of intimacy. One husband told me he regularly feels ignored by his wife because the needs of their child are so demanding upon her. His wife is often so tired that their physical intimacy has suffered. Though he understands that their child's needs must be met, the feelings of loneliness are real.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Added to this is the pressure of money being scarce. Doctors' and hospital bills keep coming in the mail, and insurance companies constantly send paperwork. Keeping up with the insurance forms can seem like a full-time job!

Many ask, "Why does there have to be so much pressure?" But the deeper question is, "What is the source of all the pressure and suffering in the world?" We will answer those questions in the next chapter.

Good News from God

As a pastor and counselor, I regularly help those who are suffering from the impact of life circumstances. But have you ever wondered where all of this brokenness comes from? Why does there have to be so much suffering in the world?

The Source of Pain and Suffering

The Bible tells us that human suffering originates in the events recorded in Genesis 3. But to understand this, we need to go back a bit further.

EVERYTHING GOD MADE WAS GOOD

In Genesis 1–2 we read how God made this world beautiful and perfect. Following his creation, at the end of the sixth day of creation week, God pronounced everything “very good” (Genesis 1:31). There was no suffering, no pain, and no death.

Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were part of this “very good” creation. We, too, are each created by God. We are designed to live

in relationship with him. Every human being is an “image-bearer” of God (Genesis 1:26–27). Additionally, the Bible teaches that we are completely dependent upon God:

In him we live and move and have our being.
(Acts 17:28)

*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
for he has founded it upon the seas and
established it upon the rivers.*
(Psalm 24:1–2)

Since God is our Creator, we are accountable to him, and therefore will answer to him one day.

If everything God made was originally good, what went wrong?

A FALLEN WORLD

When God created the world and placed human beings in it, he established standards for them to uphold. He gave Adam and Eve a simple, clear command:

*You may surely eat of every tree of the
garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of*

good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

(Genesis 2:16-17)

Sadly, they did not obey. Instead, they rebelled against God's good laws, and the whole human race fell into sin (Romans 5:12). Instead of believing that their Creator had their best interests in mind, and cherishing the beautiful freedom he had given them to eat of every tree of the garden except one, they trusted themselves and disobeyed him. They took the forbidden fruit and ate it (Genesis 3). By not trusting the Lord, they demonstrated that they did not love him.

Their sin had devastating consequences, not only for their souls, but for their bodies as well. Their bodies started to decay; the ground produced thorns; and the thorns produced pain. It has been this way ever since.

As another consequence of this sin, there was immediately pressure on family relationships. The first relationships experienced divisions as Adam blamed Eve (and God) for the problem (Genesis 3:12). Then, in the very next chapter, we read of how a brother slaughtered his own brother (Genesis 4)!

OUR LOST CONDITION

Since Adam and Eve's fall all human beings have been lost. We are determined to figure out life on our own, but we make wrong decisions. We are guilty of violating God's standards by living for our own. But Scripture is clear that

None is righteous, no, not one.

(Romans 3:10)

Because God is the King of the universe, it is treasonous to go against his wishes. There is a penalty for doing so:

The wages of sin is death.

(Romans 6:23)

Elsewhere, the apostle Paul removes our blinders and bluntly describes us in our sinful state as

foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

(Titus 3:3)