

Aging Lifestyles: An Alzheimer's patient falls in love

by Joe_Volz

What if your partner has a long-term illness, like dementia or Alzheimer's that eventually prevents maintaining a supportive, loving relationship with you?

As we live longer and the number of Alzheimer's patients rises, the question takes on new importance.

Often spouses, who become caretakers for Alzheimer's patients, form relationships with someone else for companionship, intimacy and comfort.

Recently though the flip side of such relationships has leapt into headlines with the announcement that retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's husband, John, 77, an Alzheimer's patient, has fallen for another woman, Kay, at a Phoenix residence for clients with the disease.

The O'Connors' son, Scott, made the disclosure on a Phoenix TV station.

The justice "was thrilled that Dad was relaxed and happy and comfortable living there and wasn't complaining," Scott said.

"For Mom to visit when he's happy - visiting with his girlfriend, sitting on the porch swing holding hands" came as a relief after a painful period, he added, comparing his father to a teenager in love.

What it cost Justice O'Connor to come to terms with the new phase in her husband's life wasn't addressed. But for families whose relatives have dementia or Alzheimer's the information must come as good news/bad news.

As in the justice's case, spouses who really want what is best for Alzheimer's patients may be able to appreciate the new relationship because it brings some joy to loved ones who seemingly are beyond the reach of such emotions.

The dark side of the equation, though, is the anguish and sorrow that such relationships bring to the spouse who has not descended into Alzheimer's.

A hint of how families deal with such situations is the subject matter of a new movie, "Away From Her," starring Julie Christie as a Fiona, a wife who has Alzheimer's. On her own volition, Fiona moves into a nursing home to spare her husband some of the hard work of caring for her.

The nursing home's policy is to allow no family visitors for the first month on the theory this will help people to adjust to their new situation.

During that month, though, Fiona forgets about her husband and falls in love with another patient. The response of her family in this fictional account provides some humorous scenes.

Overall, however, the movie shows how sad this is for many spouses and families, said Michael Dorf, a Columbia law professor, in his online site, Dorf on Law.

There are no statistics on how many Alzheimer's and dementia patients have such relationships. But anecdotal information from assisted living and nursing homes indicates the number of cases has increased in the last few decades.

It's likely to occur even more in the future since projections indicate that increasing numbers of people entering their 70s and 80s and older will struggle with dementia and Alzheimer's.

So how would you handle the shocking news?

Speaking for ourselves, it's easy to anticipate we'd react with shock and pain. Ultimately, we like to think we'd see that it brings a measure of comfort and happiness to the other.

Certainly we'd not consider it a betrayal of our marriage vows since the Alzheimer's victim, in later stages, has literally lost his mind and in the end, doesn't even recognize his wife.

Others undoubtedly will disagree. They may not be able to go beyond their own suffering, considering it the crowning blow after their many years of difficult care giving.

For some people, it may be a moral issue that having relationships with others while married is always wrong, no matter what the circumstances are.

A friend of ours spends several hours each day with his wife in a nearby nursing home but doubts that she even recognizes him. They have had a long and happy marriage and the thought of even going out for coffee with another woman is too much for him. It would be betraying his vulnerable wife, who needs him, he argues.

But for us, O'Connor is a compassionate model of how to manage gracefully with the blows that life brings.

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