

Marriage and Family Corner

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Most of us have heard the phrase, “Lay down the burdens you aren’t meant to carry.” When this sage advice insinuates that uncomfortable emotions are ‘bad,’ it is robbed of its wisdom. This notion often suggests that ‘bad’ emotions be avoided — and ‘good’ emotions fostered by attending to what is pleasant in the present. I agree that present moments can elicit both pleasant and unpleasant emotions, depending on perspective. And, distraction can provide respite from suffering. So, it is important to determine which burdens are best to release and which are best to carry — as well as how to carry them and for how long.

Miriam Greenspan writes in “The Wisdom of Dark Emotions” about how uncomfortable emotions are ‘in the dark,’ and not easily discussed or accepted. She further describes ‘emotion-phobia’ as ‘a pervasive fear and reflexive avoidance of difficult emotions in oneself and/or others.’ She adds, “This is accompanied by a set of unquestioned normative beliefs about the ‘negativity’ of painful feelings.” An emotion, such as despair, can be a burden and is painful. Considering putting down — or carrying — this emotion may sound simple, but can be challenging.

There are many reasons a person might feel despair, among which might be terminal or debilitating illness, the latter of which might include severe mental illnesses and addiction. Megan Divine asserts in her words about grief, ‘Some things in life cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.’ Devastating illnesses are often carried. Watching a loved one struggle with a debilitating illness can be excruciating. Knowing there is no way to control the illness can create despair.

In both my professional and personal life, I have witnessed suffering in many forms. There is a certain degree of predictability in the progression of illnesses. When the person with the illness is unable to see this progression — and unable to do anything to manage it — it can be like watching a slow-motion train wreck.



Fostering wellbeing: Carry your burden or lay it down?

During these times, releasing the burden may not be the best option. In fact, it may not even be possible. Striving to carry the burden ‘well’ becomes the goal. Self-care is crucial in this case. Detaching from the illness, while maintaining love for the person with the illness, is vital to the health of both people. Detachment doesn’t necessarily mean disconnecting, although sometimes it does. It means responding to options, instead of anxiously reacting to the illness. Detachment can be hardest when it is likely that an illness will be made worse by choices. An examination of how this distress is carried provides a chance to decide about how to carry a burden. A person who is doing a good job of self-care is better able to make this examination — and to lovingly detach — when that’s the best thing to do. Detachment is an important part of self-care across type and severity of illness, including terminal illnesses, severe mental illness and addiction.

An important question that may facilitate focus is this: What are your needs, aside from the needs of the illness?

Watching a family member with diabetes eat foods that exasperate medical symptoms can bring painful feelings. Considering thoughts and feelings about this pattern, and the predictable results and progression, can open a chance to consider if this burden should be carried, and, if so, how and for how long. Burdens carried might include despair, sorrow, frustration or anger. And, these experiences might trigger repeated attempts to convince the loved one to change the behavior. That repetition can be a heavy burden, bringing exhaustion and diminishing the quality of the relationship and of your life. Looking for options to change this ineffective coping might result in a healthier way to carry the burden of the fear and sadness.

Carrying a burden in a purposeful manner is easier said than done. That is true of anything that requires intention over habit. Carrying suffering with self-care and intention will foster greater wellbeing. In this way, even when you are not OK for a time, you will carry the burden well, honoring your experience and yourself. Remember to ask, “What do I want (need) aside from the cause of the burden?” Intentions and choices that are in line with the answers to that question will build a life well lived.

For more information on available services or to discuss information in this column, contact:

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