Tips for Migraine Sufferers and Their Spouses

by BARBARA LEECH

Marriage With Migraines

Migraine warrior Barbara Leech and counselor Eric Patterson share their thoughts on marriage with migraines.

Barbara's Thoughts on Relationships and Migraine

Can you have a migraine and feel sexy? Can you still be fun to be around? From my personal experience, the answer is probably not.

It is hard to feel attractive and passionate when any outside stimulation – visual, audible or physical – is something you are trying to avoid. My sense of humor goes out the window and nothing seems funny when I am struggling to function and in so much pain.

All of this can affect your relationships, especially your marriage or committed partnership.

Thankfully, my second time around at marriage brought me a supportive, patient human being to share my life with, but that has not always been the case. My first husband did not understand the impact of a migraine and, along with a short temper, he lacked the compassion required to actually offer help or at the very least cut me some slack.

If I had a migraine, I knew it would cause tension and blame. At times it was not possible to keep up with laundry or cook dinner after I got home from work; I was in just too much pain to do everything that was expected of me, and my marriage suffered for it. He thought I was weak, told me I was over reacting, and even suggested that I planned my migraines to sabotage fun.

It never occurred to my ex that maybe he should offer to do something to help rather than blame me for my migraines. My marriage didn't fall apart solely because of migraines, but it certainly was a factor that wore on our relationship.

How It Hurts

Migraines affect many of our relationships, but especially the one with our significant other. This relationship is most at risk when:

They Don't Understand Migraines

There is nothing worse than suffering from something incredibly painful and feeling like your loved one doesn't understand or care about what you are going through.

Often, part of our love for a significant other is tied into feeling a level of compassion and concern radiate towards

us in time of trouble or illness. When that concern is missing, we have a void in the reciprocal relationship that love is supposed to be.

Love for our partner is compromised when that care feels one-sided. We start to feel less love for someone who does not give us the compassion we need or deserve.

They Are Angered by Your Sick Day

If your partner actually gets angry at you for being “sick again” or not keeping up with tasks like cooking and cleaning, then the entire relationship can become clouded by anger and resentment.

You feel resentment towards them because they should understand what you’re going through and offer to help you out by taking over some of your tasks. They are angry at you because they feel those tasks are not their responsibility, or it is your turn and you are making up excuses.

The whole thing boils down to how much they care and how seriously they take your migraines. If they are angered by the inconvenience their love is not very apparent and the relationship begins to feel it.

Next page: four more ways migraines can impact your relationship, and strategies for helping the situation for migraine sufferers.
Page three: tips for spouses of migraine sufferers.

How It Hurts

You Don’t Feel Like Yourself

With a migraine, you’re just not you. It can affect your mood and personality, make you snippy and abrupt and even quick to anger. Migraines can impact your normal level of patience and are usually not great for your sense of humor.

In fairness, your spouse or loved one has to deal with this other version of you and it can be hard on the relationship. If you are extra grumpy it is harder for them to feel the compassion they might normally feel if you were just sick. Pain is not easy on any relationship.

Plans Get Canceled

One of the things that binds a couple together are those activities with friends and family they are typically invited to attend throughout the year. Cancel on more than a couple of these invites because of a migraine, and it is easy for people around you to see you as the party-pooper.

This breeds resentment as both of you try to deal with the other’s feelings about missing one more event or family gathering. There is also likely to be negative feedback from family or friends who may not understand why you aren’t coming to their party or event.

They Think You Are Faking

This is the worst feeling of them all. When a spouse or loved one thinks you are exaggerating or faking a migraine, you can feel completely defensive and betrayed. Betrayal is the worst feeling for any relationship and will definitely impact your love for the other person. It’s something you don’t tend to forget.

No Desire for Sex or Intimacy

If migraines are striking often, it can really impact your sex life and level of intimacy. Pain does not breed passion and often a partner may feel lonely and discarded because of numerous nights of migraine pain have interrupted

typical displays of affection.

What Can You Do to Help Your Relationship?

Studies show that about 74% of migraine sufferers have to cancel plans because of migraine pain and 68% say it disrupts their sex life. What can you do?

- **Communicate as much as possible:** Talk about your feelings as much as you can. Explain that "not tonight" doesn't mean "not ever." It's only temporary. Talk about each other's needs. Knowing exactly what your partner is struggling with stops the guessing game and decreases misunderstandings.
- **Don't over compensate:** If you are worried about your relationship it is easy to bend over backwards trying to make it up to your partner for the fact that you get migraines. While you certainly want to remain strong and keep going, you should not compromise to the point where you increase your suffering.
- **Don't try to hide a migraine:** You can come across as angry or snippy when you are suffering from a migraine. It is better to be honest about your condition because if your partner knows you have a migraine at least they won't interpret your mood as anger towards them.
- **Don't blame yourself:** You are not responsible for having migraines. They happen to you, you did not choose them. Let go of the guilt.
- **Show gratitude:** If you partner is supportive during a migraine, let them know how much you appreciate them and all they do. Feeling appreciated can make all the difference in a partnership.

Having migraines impacts your relationships as well as your life. Talk about the impact and try and express concerns, needs and gratitude. Communication is key for a couple dealing with a chronic condition to remain close and make it through their challenges together.

Next page: tips for spouses of migraine sufferers.

Counselor Eric's Tips for Spouses of Migraine Sufferers

Your work day has been long, busy and stressful. Your boss overloaded you with work and your coworkers slacked throughout their shift. When 5 p.m. rolls around you excitedly head for the door. The sun is still shining and you can't wait to get home. Maybe you can get some exercise in, or take the kids to get a treat after dinner. Maybe you can talk someone into giving you a back rub after your long day.

Then your phone rings. It's your wife, and you can tell she isn't doing well. Her voice is soft and deliberate. She asks you to hurry home, please. It's another migraine, and it sounds like this is the worst she has had in a while.

Decision Time

At this point, you have a choice to make. You can go home begrudgingly, feeling upset, bothered and selfish. You can go through the motions of checking on her only to have her notice the perturbed tone in your voice and the way you are half-heartedly going through the motions.

On the surface, this seems like a terrible decision. Surely, you would never do this – but think again. Think about the last few times she had a migraine. Think about the level of support you really provided.

Option two is to put your selfishness on the backburner and turn on the selfless version of you. In this option, you lovingly do everything in your power to help her because you recognize all that she does for you when she is feeling good. You accept that she is not choosing to have migraines negatively impact her life, knowing that no one would choose this for themselves.

The right decision to make may seem like a no brainer, but it is still a decision you need to make. An unenthusiastic attempt to help her will only make things worse. Chances are good she will experience increased shame and guilt about her symptoms. Along the way, she will begin to lose trust and respect for you.

If you are not up to the challenge of caring for your wife or cannot manage the responsibility, alert someone who is capable. Her needs cannot wait. If you are up to the test, read on to learn the best interventions that yield great results.

Take Care of Her

Hopefully, this goes without saying, but taking care of your wife during a migraine is priority number one. With luck, you can attend to her needs while her symptoms are still low, preventing new and worsening symptoms.

Want to care for the one that cares for you? Here's how:

Food/Water

When a migraine begins, your wife may be immobilized for a few hours or most of the day. During this time, her basic needs still need to be met and you're the one to meet them.

Food may not be on her mind since nausea often accompanies migraine symptoms, but discuss some helpful options before the next migraine begins. A bottle of water by her bed can go a long way to show you care and are tending to her needs. Like food, caffeine could be really helpful or really damaging. Refer to previous migraines to track her preferences.

Next page: taking care of your spouse with medications, ice and heat, and making environmental changes, plus the importance of taking care of you.

Take Care of Her

Medications

Does she have her pills nearby? Part of being a good migraine caretaker is being aware of her prescriptions, when they are given and when they need to be refilled. The medication can do no good if it's not available.

Know the difference between the ones that prevent migraines and the ones that lessen the symptoms after they have begun. Be sure that you can recognize them out of their bottle and by feel in a dark room.

Ice and Heat

What does your wife like when she is in the midst of a migraine? Does she like an ice-cold compress or a hot water bottle? Have a variety of temperature changes ready for her as she may find benefit from one initially before needing to change to the other. Even brief periods of comfort can be a welcome change from hours of discomfort.

Environmental

Many different elements help many different people with their migraines. Lighting can be a major factor so black out the windows if that is part of the routine. Work to keep the house noise down if sounds exacerbate her symptoms.

Other times music, white noise, temperature in the room, comfortable clothes and certain blankets and pillows provide a bit of relief to someone that is in intense pain. Build options before her next migraine to prepare yourself. Taking care of her sensory needs can reduce the duration and intensity of the migraine.

Take Care of You

Now that she has been checked on, check on yourself. Being any kind of caretaker is extremely taxing on someone's physical and mental wellbeing. If you cannot manage your own needs, you will never be able to help

hers.

Refocus on yourself to help both of you. Here's how:

Have Fun

The best remedy for stress is having fun. When your wife is well, be sure to reconnect on dates or family nights at home to strengthen the relationship. Try new things and go to new places to deepen your emotional bond. Remind yourself that she is still vibrant and healthy much of the time. This will recharge your batteries making it easier to fight the next migraine.

Stay Holistic

In this case, holistic means paying attention to your life in its entirety. If the only focus you have is your wife and her migraines, the other aspects of your will suffer.

Similarly, if you only focus on yourself, her needs will go neglected. Balance work with home life by communicating well at your place of employment. Letting work know about your home life can pay off as your boss will have more understanding regarding your needs to be at home and your level of stress.

Spend time maintaining friendships for another appropriate outlet.

Next page: taking care of yourself by forming a team and being aware of burnout, and some considerations for your home and children.

Take Care of You

Form a Team

Caring for a loved one is an intense job regardless of their condition. Doing it alone adds pressure and stress. Accept help and assistance often.

If none has been offered, ask for it. As long as you are clear and forthcoming about your needs, others will be more likely to come to your aid. Asking for help does not mean you are failing. The only failure is allowing yourself to suffer.

Family and friends are the natural options for an effective team. Consider a migraine treatment team to rotate through assisting you.

Beware Burnout

Burnout is a major concern for when dealing with the medical condition of others. Burnout is caused by overexerting yourself, draining your physical, emotional and financial resources. Even if you do your best to protect yourself, burnout can still walk into your life.

Burnout will bring symptoms of depression and anxiety. Track yourself and your symptoms to notice burn out warning signs including changes to your eating and sleeping patterns.

Considerations for Home and Kids

Caring for your home and children can be difficult when your wife is nursing another migraine. This is another example of selflessness coming into effect. Sure, caring for her and caring for yourself will get you both through the day, but if you give less attention to the home and kids, tomorrow could bring another flare.

Consider this: It is the next morning. Your wife’s migraine is gone, and you head to work before she is out of bed. She walks into the hallway and trips over toys to greet the kids who are wearing each other’s clothes and clearly in need of a bath. Her mouth drops to the floor when she sees the pile of dishes on the dinner table and pots and pans covering the stove.

Did you really help the situation or take the easy way out until her symptoms resolved? Doing what’s best is hard work, but it is work worth doing. Leaving a mess behind is a great way to set her up for failure. Exerting another 15 minutes of time and energy can make a huge difference towards migraine prevention.

Conclusion

Being married to someone with migraines makes life more difficult. Remember, though, no matter how hard it is, it is harder to actually have the migraines.

By giving her the best treatment, working to maintain the home and kids and taking care of yourself, you stand the best chance of avoiding burnout. No burnout means less stress and fewer headaches. This sounds like the recipe for a happy marriage.