

Lover or Carer? an You Have Both?

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Sometimes disabled people choose disabled partners, sometimes they choose non-disabled partners. But what happens to relationships when both partners meet as non-disabled people, then one partner acquires an impairment and becomes a disabled person?

An anonymous contributor relates a not unfamiliar story of pressures and cracks, from within the white-hot cauldron of a relationship with an uncertain future:

Once upon a time, I thought I'd found the perfect relationship. He was my friend, my lover, my confidante. What more could I need? At that time, nothing stood in our way so we married and everything was perfect.

We were two very independent people who disagreed about many things but it didn't matter. We could live with our differences and we didn't allow them to interfere with our "perfect" lives. The one thing I've forgotten to mention is that, for a long time, we were also two non-disabled people, and I must confess I don't think we ever considered disabled people would become important in our lovely cocoon.

As everybody knows, life can never stay the same for ever. I acquired an impairment and very quickly learnt what disability means. My lover was wonderful, so supportive and caring in the early days. He gave up his job to be with me all the time, he cut down his evenings out with his friends so that I would not be alone, he did all the shopping, cleaning, cooking etc, so that I could rest. My hero!

Then things started to go wrong. I learnt about the disabled people's movement, liked what I found out and became actively involved. Why shouldn't disabled people have the same rights as everybody else? Just because my body did not function in the same way that it used to, why shouldn't I still have an independent life and fight for what I believed in? Yes it took time, but I had found something new to focus my energies on and I was happy and fulfilled.

About the same time, my partner got involved with different carers organisations, was suddenly an expert on caring for disabled people, and spent his time, not with me, but on telling everyone else how to look after themselves.

Inevitably, the arguments began. He felt that I had become a militant activist who didn't know when I was well off. I felt that he spent so much time preaching his gospel of caring that he had forgotten what had started his involvement in the first place. Certainly our differing beliefs could not be incorporated into our relationship as other differences had always been in the past. Compromise was no longer possible.

Our sex life disappeared. Was the open and exciting thing we had once had going for us just a figment of my imagination? Was it because he could not fancy someone who wasn't "perfect" any more or was it because I could not fancy someone who I felt treated me as a second-class citizen? Is there some truth in the rumour, which non-disabled people believe, that disabled people cannot or should not have a sex life? I am not going to apportion blame although, as you might have guessed, I do feel betrayed and not in the way that is usually the reason for the breakdown of a relationship.

Don't get me wrong. We do still share something special, but it is not what we used to have and I, for one, feel a great loss for what used to be. Maybe he feels the same way, but I don't

know because we can't talk any more without the usual arguments and resentments coming out and recriminations being hurled at each other.

Deep down, I am certain that the love is still there, but is it worth all the rest of the emotional baggage that now comes will it?

We're still together, just, but for how long is anybody's guess. Will he start respecting my beliefs and/or will I start respecting his? I don't know. All I do know is that disability affects far more than the issues that are normally spoken about a maybe it's time that relationships between disabled and non-disabled people were discussed openly and brought onto our agenda. Please don't let me continue thinking I am unique or that the two of us don't stand a chance any more.

I want to be optimistic; I still hope this only a hiccup in our relationship. Please let everything be right again.