

# RELATIONSHIPS

Powerful feelings can well up in a caring relationship. Laura Swaffield offers some tips on steering a steady course.

**C**aring can be a very rewarding experience that deepens the relationship between the carer and the person being cared for. When it's like that, you won't need special help. However, things can also go wrong. And it's as well to realise this, and not be taken by surprise. Ups and downs – even extreme ones – are part of any normal relationship.

The good things about your relationship you can list for yourself. At times, it is good to remind yourself! But a list of possible pitfalls is also a good idea, so that you can look out for danger signs.

A caring relationship is, unavoidably, an intense and intimate one. This gives extra power to the feelings that can well up in you or in the person you care for. Fear – that you won't cope, or that one of you will snap. Self-pity – in either party. Hopelessness – we're stuck like this for ever. Resentment – why me?

One of the biggest feelings can be guilt, on either side. The carer may feel guilty to be the healthy, lucky one. The person being cared for can feel a nuisance. Most carers will also feel grief at losing the healthy person they hoped to have around. And they will miss their lost freedom.

None of this is anything but normal. Things only become 'bad' if either person broods, with no outlet.

If dependence is something that comes on suddenly, there can be ructions in an existing relationship. The dominant partner may become the weak one. A woman may have to take on the tasks that the man has up to now carried out or vice versa. A parent may become more like a child. It takes getting used to on both sides.

You have to steer a careful course. If someone has to be nagged to do therapy exercises, for example, the carer can be seen as a bully, and be resented. Over-protection, on the other hand, is likely to make them more dependent than they need to be. That's bad for both parties.

So what can you do to minimise some of these hazards?

- Don't expect perfection. A good row could be the sign of a healthy relationship!
  - Don't expect perfection in yourself, either. Even Florence Nightingale got fed up sometimes.
  - Don't become isolated. Never refuse help, company or time away from each other.
  - Remember that you both need someone else to talk to, sometimes in private.
  - Value an outsider's eye. Both of you can drift into bad relationship habits without noticing: possessiveness, irritability, treating each other like idiots, being too dominating, getting into a rut ...
  - Keep communicating, in whatever way you can. If it is really difficult, ask for tips from a professional.
  - Seek information. Learn all about the condition you are dealing with, so that your relationship is not muddled by unrealistic ideas or behaviour you cannot fathom.
  - Seek practical solutions to problems that sour relationships: from respite care to professional advice on a problem that drives you mad.
- But if things are really bad, seek professional help (see 'Coping with stress', page 55). Neither of you can be expected to cope with a painful relationship for ever.