

Mrs. Oliver Townwell's life in a wheelchair

Here is one more story, this time not from my own but from a colleague's practice. Mrs. Townwell (again not her real name) was the wife of a prominent insurance broker in a small town in Mississippi. Shortly after the birth of her second child, Mrs. Townwell developed weakness in her legs. She was seen by many doctors, but no one could identify the cause for the muscle weakness. In a few years, she could not stand without assistance and was soon confined to a wheelchair.

Her two daughters married and had children. Both lived in houses down the street from their parents. Even though Mrs. Townwell lived with Mr. Townwell throughout their marriage, their daughters had, since leaving home, always rotated spending nights with their partially paralyzed mother.

Twenty-three years after Mrs. Townwell was confined to a wheelchair, Mr. Townwell dropped dead in his office. At the funeral, Mrs. Townwell got up from her wheelchair and walked defiantly to the graveside. She never used the wheelchair again. She never explained or discussed her weakness. However, it was eventually learned that Mr. Townwell had begun a love affair with his secretary when Mrs. Townwell was pregnant with their second child, and before she developed weakness in her legs. The secret apparently explained her weakness and her need for perpetual help while he lived.

Comment:

In his studies of families, Dr. Murray Bowen observed that chronic illness in a spouse will stabilize and sustain a marriage (*Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, New York, NY: Aronson, 1978). I doubt that Mrs. Townwell ever read or heard of Dr. Bowen, but her story verifies his observations. By her paralysis, Mrs. Townwell controlled both the continuation of her marriage and the devotion of her two daughters.

Puzzling Symptoms

Each of the cases I have related here — Miss Cootie, Adelaine, Mrs. Quint, and Mrs. Townwell — involved patients whose whole illness controlled and was reinforced by family members. If you recognize a family member in these stories, you may benefit from consulting Dr. Marc Feldman's *Playing Sick*. (New York: Brunner-Rutledge, 2004). Dr. Feldman is an authority on patients who have multiple symptoms and an obsession about having a medical disease. Along with his many other helpful suggestions, he provides the following list of suggestions to people who are worried about having a serious medical disease despite being assured by their physicians, after comprehensive medical examinations, that they do not have a medical disease. My experience is that, while it is very difficult to get a hypochondriac to give up his or her obsession, educating family members and encouraging them not to cater to the obsessions sometimes does lead to healthier situations. Take a look at the list, and consider how you might help "your hypochondriac" put these techniques into practice.

1. Keeping a journal describing symptoms or events that led to your anxiety or panic attacks, or episodes of illness worry, should allow one to see a closer link between one's symptoms and external events.
2. Trying to restrict or put a time limit on one's Internet medical research, reading of medical books, or self-checking behaviors, as they tend to increase illness worries.
3. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including a good night's sleep, well-balanced diet, and a positive outlook. A good tip is to follow the PEAS tool sometimes used to combat depression: Pleasure, Exercise, Achievement and Socializing — try to add an aspect of each to daily activities.
4. Practicing relaxation techniques, such as breathing, meditation, or other methods may help to decrease anxiety and the effects of stress.
5. Trying to interrupt one's worries with activities that will

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fully engage one's attention and shift it away from illness; for example, hobbies, word or number games, exercise or walking, talking with a humorous friend, or recalling happy memories.

6. Thinking about alternative explanations for one's physical sensations that might include stress or normal bodily changes.
7. Breaking one's habits of worrying, one step at a time.