

THE  TIMES

How my fiancé's ongoing battle with cancer screwed up my wedding plans



Ruth Elkins with her fiancé, Mark, who suffers from Hodgkins lymphoma David Bebbert/the times

Ruth Elkins

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She hasn't made it up the aisle yet but Ruth Elkins has already had to commit to the 'in sickness' bit of her marriage vows

I was supposed to be getting married this month. Everything was planned: the invitations sent out, the caterers booked, my wedding dress half-made.

Then, two days before Christmas my fiancé Mark and I were ushered into an oncologist's clinic and told that Mark had Hodgkin's disease — a cancer of the lymphatic system. Mark is 41. I am 33. We had been together for nine months.

I write this from the chemotherapy ward where Mark is being pumped full of the latest toxic blast of ABVD drugs. We are just over halfway through a six-month course of treatment that should, with any luck, completely rid him of the cancer. At home we have more anti-sickness drugs, antibiotics and gout-preventing tablets than the local Boots, a long list of foods to avoid and I have extensive knowledge on how to give injections to stop his white blood-cell count plummeting too low.

It has not — to put it mildly — been the easiest year; not that glorious honeymoon period any newly engaged couple might enjoy. So, what is it like when you find yourself committed to the "in sickness" bit of the vows before you've even walked down the aisle? To face serious illness when your relationship is barely a year old?

"It's often much harder on the carer than the patient," our lymphoma nurse admitted when I turned up at chemo session No 2 looking utterly miserable. I felt exhausted, drained and isolated. How pathetic, I thought grimly. I'm not even the one who's ill.

Right now there are more than a million people in the UK looking after a loved one with cancer, according to the cancer charity Macmillan. Often overlooked, it says, "the emotional impact on carers is huge and remains the highest area of un-met need".

"Most people just aren't prepared for the change when they are faced with becoming a carer — and many don't even realise that that is what they've become," says Charlotte Argyle, Macmillan's carer support manager. "Often a diagnosis comes very quickly and a person can be thrown into a caring role overnight."

It certainly was for us: we went from mildly swollen glands and suspected glandular fever to cancer in less than six weeks. A brilliant service from the NHS, but a lot to get our heads around.

Life turned very quickly from a whirlwind romance, a summer of swish minibreaks and a busy, fulfilling work schedule, to a diary filled with scans, blood tests and hospital appointments. I angrily chucked away the pile of wedding magazines by my bed and replaced them with every book I could find on cancer. Our social life vanished, we cancelled our wedding, we panicked about money (Mark was told he'd probably need to take six months out) and to top it all, our sex life has taken a dive. Life has become rather quiet.

Macmillan recently undertook research into the effect on cancer carers: the results make sober reading. Almost half suffer some kind of impact on their mental health. Stress, anxiety, concentration problems, feeling trapped, isolated and depressed are all top scorers among those who support husbands, wives, relatives and friends with cancer.

I have experienced all these feelings. And although we are so lucky that Mark's cancer can be cured, the treatment is still incredibly tough. "Since Hodgkin's is curable, we hit you hard," the consultant told us. The moment the IV goes in I lose Mark for six days. He is in a fog: distant, weak, exhausted and nauseous. It is heartbreaking to watch. By the time he gets over the worst of it, he is desperate to get out and enjoy the few days before the horrible toxic cycle starts again. I, meanwhile, am absolutely knackered, fed up and could quite happily spend the week in bed.

It turns out we have it the worst way round. "Research shows that (in a mixed-sex partnership) if the man has cancer diagnosed, it tends to affect both parties quite acutely," says Katharine Ayivor, a clinical psychologist. "The male tends to be emotionally affected by the diagnosis and the female — when placed in the caring role — tends to suffer more anxiety and distress. When faced with a cancer diagnosis in a female partner, male carers tend to be able to better manage the anxiety."

A friend, who nursed his wife through breast cancer, told me: "The person with cancer just has to undergo treatment and try and get better — and in a way that's easier. But you have far more on your plate: keeping it together at work, supporting your partner, having no me time.

"If you complain you look bad, if you feel sorry for yourself you feel guilty. You can't win. You just have to get through it."

Even though the treatment is a mere six months, it often feels endless. There have been many times when I felt like running away. This, I would think, was not what I'd signed up for. I had a really nice dress! We were going to Rome on honeymoon! I'd paid for Save-the-Date tea towels! I'd even started writing a column — The Wedding Diaries — full of the ridiculousness of the wedding industry. Each time a friend posted their wedding pictures on Facebook, I raged inside. Cancer had robbed me of my wedding, of my fun. I had been fast-tracked to hard, real life. I sobbed in private. Poor, poor me.

None of this rather silly behaviour, however, makes me evil or selfish. "Carers think they shouldn't be having these kinds of thoughts, but why wouldn't you? It's a perfectly normal human response," Ayivor says. Soon after Mark's chemo started, my skin exploded in angry red spots: adult acne caused by stress, the doctor said. My shoulders are permanently knotted with tension; the migraines I am prone to have increased. Most nights I have panic dreams and I began to comfort eat — mostly it involved a lot of pasta, even more cheese, and several glasses of wine. Sure, I was putting on weight, but what did it matter, I asked myself bitterly. I didn't need to fit into a wedding dress any time soon.

In the early days I turned into a serious chemo bore. Illness became my sole subject of conversation. I have watched the eyes of friends and family glaze over as I explain, in minute detail, the ups and downs of the latest treatment. Likewise, cancer seems to be the only subject on which anyone wants to question me: "How is he, how are you?" friends and colleagues ask. I know they mean well and I do appreciate it but lately my response has become a rather tired: "It's fine. He's not going to die."

Mark told me early on that if the cancer meant I now felt I couldn't marry him, he would understand. In the early frightening days, there were moments when I felt like leaving; when I was completely overwhelmed by the extent to which the self-sufficient, independent and successful man I'd fallen for had become a frightened little boy. A cancer diagnosis either enhances an existing relationship or pushes it apart. In our case, it has merely proved that I am marrying the right man. I love him more than anything and I would never have really left. It would be unrealistic to believe that love is always fun and easy. We know that we have already faced a big test of our relationship and we're coming through it pretty well.

I have tried to make the treatment as positive a time as possible. I bought 12 toy "toxic" ducks (yes, they are covered in green skull and cross bones) — one to represent each chemotherapy session. I lined them up on the mantelpiece — fulfilling every possible metaphor. Each time we return from the chemo ward, one of the ducks gets the chop. Chemo is Duck Killing Day. It is rather cathartic and I recommend it to anyone — even duck lovers.

I cannot hope to truly understand how Mark feels going into the ward, knowing that he will come out trembling. He admits going through chemotherapy is the hardest thing he's ever done. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to face, but I am lucky that I will not lose my future husband to cancer. This year I witnessed a friend lose her husband after just 18 months of marriage; another friend has had terminal bowel cancer diagnosed and every time we are at hospital, we meet yet another person whose prognosis is bleak.

Mark and I have a lot for which to be thankful. And in the end, I'm even quite happy that the wedding has been put off for a year: Not only is it due to be the coldest, wettest May for 100 years, but I've eaten way too many carbs and my skin is terrible.

Cancer: A survivor's guide

1 Be honest with each other.

Don't pretend that cancer isn't stressful. You'll both be scared, fed up, and depressed at times and being truthful about your feelings will help you to cope better — together.

2 Take time for yourself.

Even if it's just a few hours away — respite away from illness is essential for carers. It will enable you to take better care of your partner. And don't feel guilty about taking time for yourself. Ultimately, this will help neither of you.

3 Carers need their own support.

A carers support group or helpline can be useful, or simply a good friend to take you out for an afternoon of shopping and a laugh. Don't allow the cancer to strangle your spirit, even though it will try.

4 Have a positive attitude.

It really does make things much easier.

5 Remember to take care of your own health.

Eat well, don't overdo the booze (alcohol is a depressive) and exercise. You need to be healthy and strong for the pair of you.

6 Remember that all conditions are temporary — even the really bad times.

I've heard this even from carers who have ultimately lost their partners to cancer.

17 comments




 **Katharine Ayivor**

1 person listening

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 **Debbie Holland** May 27, 2012 10:59

I often think the emotional impact of dealing with a long term illness on both the patient and the carer is totally underestimated by most people. Add to that the financial strain that comes from not having any income coming in and you can very quickly start to struggle under the strain of it all.

Having come through several months of a serious illness earlier this year, I know what an enormous strain it places on the whole family, and can only admire her for supporting her fiance and yet being able to be honest and open up to the fact that it is a huge stress as well.


Even a few months later it has a lingering effect. I was in tears the other day when my 7 year old daughter was having a discussion and admitted she very worried that Mum was going to get very very sick again and maybe die. When you are struggling to recover, it is easy to underestimate what a hard time everyone else is having as you are just focusing on getting well.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

 **Ruth Logie** May 26, 2012 19:53


One suggestion that Ruth Elkins doesn't make is to use psychological counselling. In the case of my husband and me, it made the difference between divorce and a happy marriage despite everything. The carers are so often forgotten, unrecognised, crazy with anxiety, wanting to help but not knowing how. The patient gets the therapy, the carer sits outside the door waiting. That's not right. I strongly recommend marital counselling. It takes so much pressure off.

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 **Voice of the Voyager** May 23, 2012 19:23

Well done on writing about a subject people don't wish to discuss. I hope Mark pulls through and your Big Day is a little more special. Good luck to you both - where there's life, there's hope.

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 **Roger Peach** May 22, 2012 01:49

Thanks for writing such an honest article on a very sensitive subject.

I cared for my wife through three years of breast cancer treatment, and she is still here today, 20 years later.

Loved the ducks - kill the bloody lot and enjoy doing it!!

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 **WildeChild** May 21, 2012 19:32

I got to the 2 weeks before our wedding in a state of almost total exhaustion having saved all our annual leave for a month's honeymoon in India, my htb broke his hip (on his stag do!) and was subsequently diagnosed with osteoporosis. Cue cancelled honeymoon, groom on crutches, and bride (whose nickname is Nurse Ratchett from One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest) in post as carer, and I promptly came down with flu the day after our wedding.

One of the hardest, overnight adjustments I've had to make, and not the most romantic start to married life!

Carers may appear to come across as selfish sometimes when we're having a whinge, after all, we're not the ones who are poorly, but it is really really hard. None of us is an angel, and all those criticising Ruth need 'to walk a mile in her shoes'.

You can have no idea how you will react / cope in that situation, however even tempered you are in normal circs - just hope for the best.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Loretta Marsh**

May 21, 2012 14:08

Refreshing and honest. Having lost my husband of 9 years to cancer with 2 primary age children to care for I identify with everything that she says. Good luck to you both.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**EnglishRose**

May 21, 2012 13:21

Good luck with it all. It does sound a little selfish in parts but I don't think until you have been with someone and married for a while you should be subject to the same obligations, necessarily. I do think they need to think about money. If money is tight when he cannot work may be she needs a more lucrative career. One hopes she is not hoping to live off his earnings. Perhaps if they have children he could care for them whilst she earns and works.

This is in fact an issue about marrying a man over 40. In men and women things tend to be worse then, health, fertility and looks of course. Going younger is often the better bet unless money matters.

What I wanted to know as I read it is whether he saved sperm and if his fertility is affected.

Never marry a woman who fusses about weddings and has wedding magazines. Often them a church or civil wedding with no trimmings at all and see if they love you enough for that or whether they are really far too materialistic and worth avoiding. It can be a key test.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Colin Anderson**

May 21, 2012 12:40

I was diagnosed with the same illness on the day that I planned to propose to my then girlfriend. Five and a half years down the road we are happily married with one child and one on the way.

Tell Mark to endure his medicine the best he can and to remember that he has the perfect excuse for getting out of the wedding arrangements.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Mr Adam Sutch**

May 21, 2012 11:45

Well written.

Strikes a chord of truth.

Good Luck

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Mike TC**

May 21, 2012 11:37

I don't think that the article is at all self-centered. She is writing it from the standpoint of being a carer/supporter and therefore it naturally focuses on how she feels and the impact that it has had upon her.

I think that her comments are refreshingly honest and practical and it sounds to me as though she has been able to find the right balance with Mark and to view the situation in a sensible and sensitive perspective.

I hope that his recovery successfully remains on track and that the side effects from the treatment diminish quickly. Good luck to both of them and I hope that they will be in a position to get married next year and to finally be able to put this unexpected trauma behind them.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Sara Williams**

May 21, 2012 09:17

I don't know whether this will get through the moderators but The Selfish Pig's Guide to Caring really helped my Grandma get through caring for her husband when he was seriously ill.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Dean Bainbridge**

May 21, 2012 08:59

My wife is recovering from breast cancer.

What she went through is far, far more difficult than what I endured. I must say that this article is a little self-centred.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Mr Robert Murray**

May 21, 2012 09:53

Dean, I hope your wife makes a safe recovery. I must say (despite, thankfully, never having had to endure this with my wife) that I agree with your comment. While it's important to consider oneself, the author seems to be missing the forest from the trees here.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)**Lande**

May 21, 2012 10:51



I don't think the article is at all self-centred. She clearly loves her fiance and admits that he is going through a very difficult time, one which she doesn't think she can fully understand.

I think she's brave to express what perhaps many carers feel but are afraid to say in order to avoid sounding self-centred. It's a very difficult position to be in - it can be a very emotionally challenging time. Good on her for articulating her thoughts and best wishes to her husband for a quick recovery.

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dennis Peck

May 21, 2012 08:30

How I could easily have written that letter caring for a cancer patient. My huaband had already had a stroke whilst in hospital during an operation for ahip replacment hip 14 years ago so the addition of Postrate cancer

SO now I care for a disabled and one with cancer. To say I have been lost in the family because everyone ask how is my husband but the family always asks how is Dad OR bILLY PAS AS HE IS KNOWN , tO SAY THE CARERS

GET TIRED OR EXHAUSTEDis putting it mildly getting my husband to hospital is very difficult as he cannot walk so wheel chairs are a must fortunately my husbsnd has a good brain which hasnt been affected.

Carers are very expencive to employ and sometime they are not very good. but you plod on and hope there is someone who cares Ive had 14years of not being me fortunately I love my husband we have been married 60 years that must say something. RUTH PECK

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)



Sarah Henderson

May 21, 2012 14:40

Dear Ruth

I have great respect for your love and tenacity.I know a little about how much of one's life disappears in a fog of stress and exhaustion when being a full-time carer of a loved one.However,you must make sure you get all the help you are entitled to and a chance for respite.Speak to your GP or Macmillan to get this sorted out.You both need and deserve it.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)



Mary Elizabeth Delaney

May 20, 2012 23:19

Good luck and God bless you.

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