

# When Partners Start Forgetting

Farrell Hannah,  
Honorary Associate

Allison is rushing to get ready for a theatre engagement with her sister. Frank notices the commotion and asks what's going on. "What are you talking about?" says Allison angrily, "I told you yesterday that I was going to the theatre with Marion. Don't you ever listen?" "You never told me that" says Frank. Allison now thinks that Frank is either playing games or he didn't care enough to listen to her in the first place.

**Occasionally, one of us will forget something that the other has told us recently.**

As couples age there may come a time when one or both partners has an occasional lapse in memory or maybe even more regular and noticeable memory difficulties. This can be both irritating and concerning for the partner of the one who has become memory challenged.

Allison is definitely frustrated and annoyed but since this has happened before she is also getting worried. She wonders if their relationship is weakening or if Frank is becoming depressed or worse. Her frustrated response is just her knee-jerk reaction but she has noticed that since Frank retired they have more time and interactions together which might explain the greater number of incidents like this occurring.

Getting into a "Yes I did - No you didn't" type of argument only deteriorates into fault finding and harms the relationship. Allison has to admit that

she occasionally forgets details that Frank tells her as well. Allison realizes she could have chosen to give Frank the benefit of the doubt and she vows that if this happens again she will clearly and kindly (and not condescendingly) repeat the forgotten detail. She wishes now that she had responded more caringly; something like "Sorry Frank, I meant to remind you that I'm going out to the theatre tonight with my sister. I know you wanted to stay home and watch the game anyway".

**At other times, one of us will forget that we have already told a story or some non-critically important detail to the other.**

"Frank, wait until I tell you about the piece of property that Marion and Stan bought" says Allison. "You already told me that three times" retorts Frank as he shakes his head. "What on earth is wrong with you?" Allison looks shocked and hurt and a bit frightened. "Did I really?" she asks softly. "Maybe there really is something wrong with me."

If Allison honestly doesn't remember having told the story before, how loving is it to blurt out a bruising statement like, "What's wrong with you?" or "You tell that same joke every Christmas."

When someone repeats the same story a second, third, or fourth time within a matter of days or weeks or even months, consider it a gift that they want to include you in their life! Rather than abruptly stopping the story, a wise and more loving choice may be to value the presence of the story-teller in your life and listen patiently and kindly. There are

times when we all forget that we told a particular person a certain story or joke. Frank could have asked himself the question: "Has it really been helpful for Allison's memory functioning to remind her that she's already told me this story before?" And he can remind himself that Allison is simply sharing her excitement and in doing so is

making a loving connection.

Young children often like to be told the same story over and over again, and they often like to repeat the same story. Rather than cut them off, most adults are very patient with their young children and grandchildren at these times. Maybe we can apply the same adult wisdom to our relationship with adults as well. And we should remember that we are all children in many ways and still learning.

**Recent memory for non-life-threatening details should become less important than patience and wisdom in strengthening the relationship of a loving, aging couple.**



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## My Midlife Crisis

I recently bought a high-powered sports car. It has an engine the size of a 747 and can go from zero to 100 in about one second. I tell people I wanted something that was sexy and racy with a hint of sophistication much like my own personality. This usually elicits those sad looks reserved for balding old men who fancy themselves as chick-magnets. This purchase was a spontaneous act, not in keeping with my down-to-earth, reserved and supposedly practical image. I even tried balancing a pair of dark designer sunglasses on top of my head like those really cool guys. Unfortunately I discovered that tri-focal sunglasses are extra heavy and keep falling into my lap. Did I mention the wicked Bose stereo system in the dashboard that can rattle the windows of houses three blocks away? My wife and grown children are still shaking their heads.



Rick Hancock, Psy.D.  
Registered Psychologist

I've only had my vehicle for a few weeks but have already overheard several people mumble the words "midlife crisis" under their breath. That couldn't be me, not really. I'm just trying to have a little fun during my long daily commute to and from work. It's not like I traded my wife in for a younger model, bought a luxury yacht, chucked my career, and headed off into the sunset. Or is it?

Although the experts disagree on whether a midlife crisis actually exists there appears to be a time in our lives when we sense the passing of youth and the rapid advancement of old age. We begin to measure our age, not in years spent, but in years remaining. It's a time

when we reflect back on our goals and accomplishments, if any, and take special note of our bad decisions and wasted opportunities. Did I really make my work a higher priority than my wife and kids and did I make money and status the holy grail of my existence? Did I allow my health to suffer at the same time by ignoring stress, good eating habits, and proper exercise? And that period of years between 40 and 60 is often when long-term marriages begin to deteriorate. Some even turn to alcohol or other drugs in a misguided attempt to relieve their painful realizations.

Many feel a need for adventure and change. I have friends in the over 50 crowd who have either retired early or work part-time. Some have taken on major challenges like walking across England from sea to sea, peddling their bikes on long journeys, building a log cabin, travelling around the world, and writing a book. Some simply savour the joy of babysitting their grandkids, volunteering at the Red Cross, or turning their backyard into the garden of their dreams.

The journey from youth to middle age and on into old age may seem frightening and discouraging but you can also choose to see it as an opportunity to re-evaluate and perhaps change the direction of your life. Rather than believing that aging is simply about having to give things up, try to think about what you'd like to start. When you reach 60 you could still be only two-thirds of the way through your life. That leaves a great deal of time to broaden your interests, travel, take courses, learn new skills, and take up new hobbies and

sports. Or why not embark on some new challenging adventure? There is still a whole world of opportunity around us. Do what your health and interests allow so that in another few years you aren't looking back with even greater discouragement.

Those struggling with their current stage of life may want to consider contacting a counsellor or a lifestyle coach. Don't waste your time in regret. You may not be interested in buying a flashy new car but ... VROOM VROOM ... it works for me.



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# Living With a Chronic Illness: Why You Should Maintain Hope

## Part 1 – What to expect

Kathy vividly remembers her “life turning upside down” after her car accident ten years ago. She has struggled with chronic pain ever since. Despite being a “high achiever,” she has not been able to work since this time and has had difficulty accomplishing her usual household tasks. Martin has had multiple sclerosis for eight years and had to leave an upper management position, after 20 years with the company. Both Kathy and Martin experience ongoing low mood, feelings of uselessness, and an overall decrease in their self esteem. Both feel isolated from others, as they are no longer able to participate in activities with friends or family to the same degree. They frequently feel that significant people in their lives don’t understand what they are going through and at times feel rejected or blamed for their illnesses. Both feel defined by their respective illnesses and are no longer the “Kathy” and “Martin” that they previously were.

The scenarios described above are indicative of what someone with a chronic illness might experience. Unlike more acute illnesses, chronic illnesses are often poorly understood, both by the patient, their family members, and, at times, even by the physicians involved in their care. Well meaning friends or family members may tell them that “it is all in their head,” “they are using their illness as an excuse” or that they just need to “pull up their bootstraps and get on with their lives.” And “getting on with their lives” is essential; however, it is often a long and difficult struggle, with little clarity regarding how to do this.

So what does “getting on with one’s life” mean? Getting on with one’s life involves finding a way to slowly adjust to and cope with the illness, and to ultimately regain a sense of meaning and value in one’s life. However, people need to actively go through a number of stages

of dealing with their illness before they can get to this point. The typical stages are as follows:

Initially, the person experiences challenging symptoms that are new to them. They may feel confused, overwhelmed, and fearful about their symptoms. They may begin to experience a sense of loss regarding the impact of their symptoms on their lives and the consequent limitations that they are facing. Some experience a sense of denial and even try to ignore their symptoms. In this stage, the person may see a number of health care professionals, who offer conflicting diagnoses and treatment methods.



Deborah Kors, Ph.D.  
Registered Psychologist

During the second stage, a diagnosis may be provided. This can provide relief in explaining what has been happening to them. However, there may be increased uncertainty about their future and how much improvement can be hoped for. The reality of having a chronic illness has sunk in and is very difficult to accept. Many will **not** accept it and will push themselves past their physical limits, resulting in increased symptom severity. Others may experience an increased sense of despair regarding their illness. Typically, there are ongoing attempts to find the “magic cure.” Many wind up isolating from others who don’t appear supportive, although they may desperately yearn for their support and understanding.

In the third stage, the person has accepted the fact that they have a chronic illness. At this point, they may experience deep grief about the loss of their former “self” and other illness-related losses. They may question why this has happened to them. Consequently, they may question their religious or spiritual beliefs, as well.

During the fourth stage, the person has found a way to integrate the illness into their life. They understand their symptom patterns (i.e., from relapse to

plateau) and have learned how to structure their lives accordingly. At this stage, the person has developed new interests that are compatible with their physical challenges. Although some relationships may have been lost, others have been strengthened and new relationships are likely to have been developed. The person has developed a sense of meaning and purpose to their life, despite the physical challenges that they continue to endure. They are no longer defined by their illness; rather, the illness is viewed as one aspect of who they are.

### Parenting Book

#### Parenting Teens Without Power and Strings

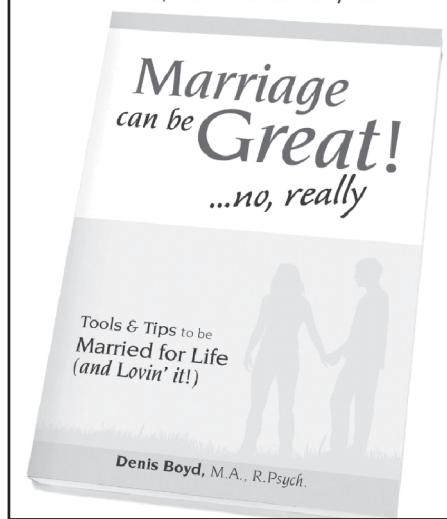
A handbook for parents coping with difficult teen behaviour.

by Rick Hancock, Psy.D., R.Psych.

Cost: \$10.00

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## Part 2 – How to move forward

The following psychological strategies can help you move through the four stages, so that, ultimately, you can “get on with your life.”

1. It is essential to let go of blaming yourself – your illness is truly not your fault. It could happen to anyone. It is important to slowly develop compassion for yourself with what you are facing. It takes enormous *strength* to deal with a chronic illness and being able to validate this can be extremely helpful.
2. It is necessary that you slowly modify your expectations for what you need to accomplish each day. Unfortunately, compared with your earlier days, having a chronic condition necessitates using a different “yard stick” to evaluate your accomplishments. This can be hard to face. However, it is very important to learn to give yourself credit for the “small accomplishments” of each day. Pacing yourself, so that you do small chunks at a time, with breaks in between, is essential, so that you do not “crash” the next day.
3. In the initial stages of the illness, you may experience various emotional changes (e.g. outbursts of sadness or anger) in response to your illness. This is not unusual as you are dealing with significant changes in your life.
4. You may have to slowly learn when you need to ask others for help. Significant people in your life may truly not know how to support you. You may need to educate them with
5. At some point, it will be essential to go through a grief stage. This entails actively mourning the losses/changes in your life and the loss of your former self. Taking time in your day to allow feelings of sadness and anger, as well as journaling about your feelings is very important.
6. Writing a narrative about your “journey” with your illness can be valuable. This can assist you with developing new insights about yourself, others, and life. In this process, you can discover your true values and what is truly important and meaningful to you. Surprisingly, you will find a number of qualities that still remain true of you, even with the illness (e.g. empathy, creative side, sense of humor, keen interest in learning new things, etc.)
7. It will be essential to find new interests/hobbies that fit with the limitations imposed by your illness. Reading, writing, creating art work, playing a musical instrument, attending classical music performances in small venues, and having meaningful conversations with others are examples of the many possibilities.
8. You may also have to examine some tough existential questions regarding the unfairness of why the illness

what you need. Finding helpful supports, through friends, family, or a therapist is essential for navigating through these phases. Seeking a support group of others who are facing a chronic condition can also be helpful.

happened to you. Reconnecting with a religious faith or a spiritual belief system is enormously helpful in this regard. In the process of answering these questions, you can actually discover a greater sense of meaning from what you have experienced. Ironically, your life may take on a greater sense of depth and purpose, despite your illness.

9. Reading true stories about others who have used adversity to transform their lives in a meaningful way can also assist in developing greater meaning and purpose.
10. Reframing some of your losses and seeing them from a more positive perspective is also essential. For example, perhaps, you are no longer able to do weekly walks/hikes with your closest friend; however, you can attend monthly lectures on art history; or, you can engage in deep conversations about life, over coffee. In fact, despite your losses, your newly developed insights may, in turn be a “gift.” You may have developed a compassion for the struggles of others, as well as a certain “wisdom” about life. Your insights might even inspire others or help them, in turn, create more meaningful lives.

**Note:** During all these stages, it is essential to continue to see your physician for ongoing monitoring of your condition. Additionally, the strategies described above take time and effort to implement. If you feel that you are not able to move forward through these stages, it is essential to get counselling from a licensed therapist.

### Marriage Workshop

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Presented by  
Denis Boyd, M.A., R.Psych.

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### Retirement Cruise

Retirement can be, and should be, the time in our lives when we enjoy the fruits of our labours.... when we can do the things we want with the people we love. Don’t end up in this exciting stage of life unprepared. Take some time to practise because, “practise makes perfect!” What could be more perfect than to practise on a 2009 Mediterranean Fall cruise.? Denis Boyd and Terry Colton will be two of the speakers at the Practise Retirement Conference aboard the Celebrity Solstice. For more information on this Conference/Cruise please contact Dr. Terry Colton, Conference Coordinator at: [theteam@lifestyleplanners.com](mailto:theteam@lifestyleplanners.com) or call our office.

