

## Being A Male Carer

Why is it that men are wired to put so much pressure on themselves? They are conditioned from an early age to be the problem solver, the person you go to to get things fixed (the “go-to” person), the person who thinks the clearest and the fastest. And whilst they can hold down jobs that require fast thinking and high degrees of processing, it is interesting to see how challenged they are when the problem they face requires a solution based on emotion rather than thoughts and process.



All of the men who come into my counselling room are unhappy about some aspect of their life. After all, if life was going splendidly then a counselling room would be the last place they would be sitting in.

Many of the men I see are partners of cancer patients. They come for many reasons but a significant number come because they want to make things better for their partner. Some think

that I can give them a magic bullet to cure their partner's illness and I have to disappoint them. Many have come to learn new ways of communicating with their partner. Some have even been as honest as to say: “I just don't know what to say to her”.

Whilst they sit with their thinking caps on many men will find it difficult to find ways of expressing themselves in a language that their partner can understand. This is simply because the man is often thinking too much about finding the “right” thing to say. Men often suffer from such performance anxiety that, in a situation that is emotionally charged, the thought of not being able to say exactly the right thing at the right time can bring much anxiety and stress.

In his book “The Magician's Way”, William Whitecloud uses the game of golf as the medium to confront the attitudes of the main character, Mark. Mark is sent to a golf coach who challenges Mark's approach to golf. The coach says: “when you're playing a shot, you're standing in an invisible circle. Golfers believe that you hit a good shot by getting everything in the circle right; that if you can simultaneously control every aspect of the swing it will translate to getting the ball to do what you want it to. But golf is really about what's outside the circle. It's about what's out there. It's about the target. If you can go back to trusting your natural ability and just focus on the target, you will play excellent golf. You will be able to do anything you want to.”

## Counsellor's Reflections

If we use the analogy of the golfer's swing circle, we might be able to apply to the challenge facing so many men who want to do a better job of caring for their partner in stressful situations. By staying focused on what is inside the swing circle we are too busy looking at ourselves, our words, our expressions, and the pressure we place upon ourselves to say and do the right thing. What would happen then if we changed our focus and looked at what was outside the swing circle — if we looked only at the target and trusted ourselves. Then our focus would be on our partner who is perhaps only looking for a new connection through actions and words, any supportive words, not necessarily always the most perfect words.

Many women fighting cancer report to me their frustration at seeing their husbands or boyfriends just close down during this already stressful period after the diagnosis or treatment. When I suggested to them that my experience with men suggests that they fear saying the wrong thing, a lot of women have gritted their teeth and clenched their fists with frustration and say "I wish he would just say something, anything, that would let me know that he's hurting too. You don't know how much it would mean to me to hear him say that he still loves me and that he supports me in my fight to overcome this illness. If a guy doesn't know what to say then maybe they should just say "I don't know what to say". Maybe it's not even about saying, maybe it's about asking and then listening."

It's an interesting paradox to observe how men struggle to know what to say, and then to listen to their partners who would welcome any conversation. As an observer to the process, when I work with the couple or the whole family in "team counselling" it's often possible to realign this mismatch in fears and expectations in one session. On many occasions the sense of relief that I observed in the room with these clients is truly liberating for them and brings them closer together as the common fight against the illness continues.

Sometimes it's not about thinking at all, but rather feeling and then doing spontaneously. Many people say: "it's not the words that matter, it's the feelings and emotions behind the words that tells the story".

As Whitecloud suggests: "when you go from focusing on the process to the end result, you shift from the mechanical nature of the universe to the magical".