

Being A "Dutch Uncle"

There is an old expression, "a Dutch Uncle," which refers to a person who gives you honest feedback.

Some years ago, I had a couple as clients who had only been married a short time and the wife, let's call her Sarah, had also been battling cancer. One day her husband, let's call him Andy, came to see me for a session on his own. He said he needed to talk through an exchange that he had had with Sarah the day before.



When Sarah was first diagnosed her many friends stood by her – they called on her often and were always close by to offer comfort and support. Being in her early 30s the discovery of a cancerous lump in her left breast certainly impacted on her busy work and social life.

Sarah and Andy married well into Sarah's cancer journey and the increased treatment regime was having a major impact on her energy levels. Andy accompanied Sarah to her chemotherapy sessions and was there with her in the doctor's surgery whenever it was time to receive the results of the ongoing tests. Andy was also there after work each night to care for Sarah when her energy levels were at the lowest.

But Sarah had a reputation of always being happy and seemingly carefree and as she went through her chemotherapy cycle, and Andy started seeing some differences in her behaviour when friends and family were around to what she was like when the two of them were home alone together.

And he struggled with this for some time watching Sarah laughing openly and giggling cheekily when she and Andy were entertaining guests. When the guests had all gone home Andy dutifully cleaned up, washed up, and made sure everything was back in its rightful place, ready for the new day. Invariably, with the sound of the music and the noise of the conversation now gone, Sarah would normally fall asleep where she had been sitting, unable to get herself ready for bed.

This went on for some time with Andy's concern slowly developing into frustration and then irritation. The turning point came when they were invited to attend the wedding of two close friends. Sarah's energy levels were only slowly rising after her last bout of chemotherapy, but she was so looking forward to their friends' wedding. The entire week before, Sarah went to bed very early each night. On the night of their friends' wedding, Andy said, Sarah looked radiant. All night she wore a huge smile on her face, engaged in animated conversations with

Counsellor's Reflections

their friends and danced with Andy the entire night. As they walked back to their car after the reception had ended Sarah commented on what a wonderful evening she had had. She had caught up with friends she hadn't seen for some time, immersed herself in the celebration of seeing their friends marry, and found her carefree attitude again, albeit for only one night. Within a kilometre of leaving the reception hall Sarah fell asleep and stayed that way until they got home.

The day after the wedding was a difficult one for Sarah. She had given so much energy to the evening before that there wasn't much left to give Andy when he came home from work. After dinner they cuddled up together to watch some television and Andy felt that he had to find words to tell Sarah about his frustrations.

Sarah listened attentively as Andy gently talked about his increasing sense of separation from her. He told me that at the end of the conversation he said to Sarah "sometimes I wish that I was still one of your friends rather than your husband. Your friends always seem to see the happy, cheerful, and energised version of you, while I feel that I'm getting whatever is left after they have gone home. And lately, that hasn't been much, because your energy levels are so low that you fall asleep when we're alone". Andy told me that Sarah didn't react but calmly asked whether she could sleep on what Andy had said and whether they could continue the conversation when she had worked out her response.

In his book "The Last Lecture", Randy Pausch reflected on his own behaviour after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He wrote "When you have a dire medical issue, it's tough to know how you're really faring emotionally. I had wondered whether a part of me was acting when I was with other people. Maybe at times I forced myself to appear strong and upbeat. Many cancer patients feel obliged to put up a brave front. Was I doing that, too?"

Andy was in my office talking about his confusion around the conversation he had had with Sarah. On the one hand, he felt empowered at being able to even verbalise what he was feeling. He felt that he had been sensitive in the words he had chosen to use during his talk with Sarah and felt that he had made his point with great love and caring. On the other hand, he said to me, he felt that he was being selfish and guilty at suggesting that Sarah should consider him before their friends.

The following week Andy came back to see me, again alone. He talked about feeling more at peace with the confusion that he had talked through in our previous session. He talked about what Sarah's reaction had been to what he had said. Andy said that Sarah came back during the week between our sessions and said that she had spent quite some time reflecting on his words. She thanked him for having the courage to say what he had said and told him how much she respected and valued his view of things. Sarah said that indeed she did feel pressure to appear happy and pain-free when she was in the company of family or friends because she felt so guilty when she saw the pain in the eyes when she told them that she was feeling sick or sad.

Counsellor's Reflections

Sarah then talked about how important Andy was to her and how his love gave her strength every day. She said she was sorry for the way she had “distributed her energy and happiness” that had left him feeling so isolated.

Sarah said that the wonderful result that came from her reflection on Andy's words was that she had come up with a new mantra that she would use to guide her from then on. She wrote it on a large piece of paper so that she could leave it on the dining room table for all visitors to see. It simply said, “from now on, it's OK if it's not OK”. She said that she felt it was important for her to be in being more real when visitors came to see her and if she was having a bad day it was better for her to be honest about that. In that way Sarah felt that she didn't have to expend her energy pretending to be happy and pain-free when she wasn't. Sarah also felt, as Andy reported to me, that she would have more energy to just be in the moment with Andy when they were together.

Andy learnt a lot about being a Dutch Uncle in those weeks. He had been patient, loving, and sensitive in having a very important and tough conversation with Sarah. Andy had given Sarah a mirror to see herself in another light which gave her an opportunity to see how she was coping with her illness and her treatment.