Tips for Building and Maintaining Your Relationships With COPD

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Relationships With COPD

My wife, Leanne and I were dating for just two years when I was diagnosed with COPD. While this diagnosis knocked both of us over, it only served to strengthen our relationship. An easy option for my wife would have been to move on with her life, as staying with me may have been a short and tragic experience.

When I was first diagnosed with COPD, my prognosis was not good and living a long prosperous life was not looking like an option. However, Leanne and my relationship are built on love, honesty and openness. This has helped us fight my COPD together which has given us hope for a long happy life together.

Relationships can be difficult at the best of times, and when you throw a chronic disease like COPD into the mix, it can be even more challenging. Whether it is a relationship with your family, friends or a new love, understanding the limitations of COPD is important. In this article, I explore how I navigated my way through to enjoy the very positive people in my life.

Why it's Important to Explain What COPD is to Loved Ones

If you are living with COPD or caring for someone who has COPD, you would know it can be an invisible disease. Not invisible to patients or carers, but invisible to the outside world. How many times has someone said to you, “You look fine” or "They don't appear sick"? To be fair, most people with COPD do not go out in public unless they are at their best, so it is understandable that some people do not physically see COPD and don’t understand.

As COPD patients, it is important we try and explain what COPD is to people who do not understand it. This can be tricky sometimes as we do not want to be seen like we are looking for pity – when all we are looking for is understanding.

In my experience, when explaining how my disease affects me, I find it is important to include what I am trying to do to help improve my quality of life. This type of approach shows people you are proactive and not looking to form a pity party. There is a stigma to COPD and people who are naïve about our disease will lose interest if we talk about the cause or how awful COPD is.

For example, this sort of strategy can be useful for adults, but when dealing with our children, things can become a little more complicated.

I was only 45 years old when I was first diagnosed, and while our kids were not babies anymore, they were still kids with adolescent minds and different personalities. So, telling them about how Dad has a severe lung disease, which is going to become worse, was a difficult discussion.

We chose not to share all the doom and gloom with them – as my wife and I were still coming to terms with my

diagnosis. Instead, we downplayed my COPD by telling the kids I had a lung disease, but everything was going to be fine. Gradually over the eight years since my diagnosis, we have given them more insight into COPD and its effects.

Talk About How You Want to Be Treated by Others

When I was first diagnosed, I made it clear to all my family I did not want to be treated any differently. I did not want to make excuses, and I just wanted our life to continue on as normal as possible, just a little slower.

My family has certainly embraced this strategy, and I am treated no differently to anyone else. They realize I have my limitations and understand why, but we work around them. Yes, I have COPD, but we limit its impact on our family.

It's Okay to Distance Yourself From People Too

My relationships with COPD have not always been as smooth outside my family network. Indeed, I have distanced myself from some people due to their negative impact on my family and me.

Not everyone wants to understand COPD, and you certainly find out who your real friends are. As a patient, I think it is important to keep things as normal as possible and surround yourself with positive people.

Building New Relationships With COPD

One of the unexpected outcomes of having COPD is the new friendships I have formed with fellow patients both here in Australia and overseas. I have been fortunate to be able to catch up with some of my new international friends when traveling.

Others, while I have not met in person, I have been able to speak to via Skype. Our COPD community is strong and, for the most part, a positive one.

The Bottom Line...

I consider myself very lucky in terms of the strength of my relationships since being diagnosed with COPD. I might have lost a few friends along the way, but I know the relationships I now enjoy are strong and will last.

Love, honesty, and openness have worked for me, and I believe it will work for most COPD patients. Be prepared to work at maintaining these relationships and do not use your disease as an excuse not to. Your true friends will take you any way you come, good days and bad!

All your relationships with COPD may not survive, but the ones that do will be strong ones. They will serve you well as you continue your journey with COPD.