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# Can we be there through 'sickness and health'?



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A colleague and I were enjoying lunch and discussing a young couple we knew. We were admiring their relationship and how it depicted a promising devotion to each other.

What does it mean to be devoted to another? How is it different from loyalty? And, more importantly, how is it different from being committed to another? According to the Random House Dictionary, it means "zealous and ardent attachment."

There is exclusivity between two people that appears unlimited by time, suggesting that being devoted can change in meaning throughout the years.

In the early stages of a relationship, couples share many intentional promises. The Everly Brothers, and later Carly Simon and James Taylor, sang the song "Devoted to You." This song portrays many of the hopes and passionate dreams couples envision within the beginning of the relationship. In the third verse, they vow: "I'll never hurt you I'll never lie I'll never be untrue I'll never give you reason to cry I'd be unhappy if you were blue."

These words speak loudly about the idealization in a new relationship and the desire to create a perfect bond. As young couples see the naiveté in their initial sense of attachment, the meaning of attachment begins to wax and wane.

The Everly Brothers' last lyric depicts this journey well.

"Through the years our love will grow Like a river it will flow It can't die because I'm so Devoted to you."

This verse easily resonates for many couples in midlife.

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As time progresses and experiences of joy and pain evolve, partners grow to appreciate the strength of their connection. For example, each year six couples spend a lengthy weekend together on an island. Their years of marriage range from 10 to possibly 40.

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The "ardent attachment" for each couple is evident through the hurdles each has courageously embraced. Some have confronted cancer, some unemployment and others major disappointment and challenges with their children. The depth of their devotion is evident when times are the roughest. Their ability to sustain strength during hard times together is similar to the "river as it flows." They are able to support their partner through "sickness and health."

And finally, how does devotion present in the final days of

a couple's life. These couples may experience the first verse of the Everly Brothers' song. The lyrics are: "Darling you can count on me Till the sun dries up the sea Until then I'll always be Devoted to you."

Couples seldom think of their final days together as a test of devotion. Two different couples exemplify this passing journey well. The first example is of a woman who left her European home in her twenties to be with the one she loved. He moved to the United States for opportunity and a better career. Over the years she adjusted and accepted cultural differences while raising their family of five. When her husband turned 84 he became acutely ill and was hospitalized. Daily, she remained by his side until his death three months later.

Another example, within this same age bracket, is of a couple where the man suffers from multiple illnesses and is crippled. His wife is diagnosed with dementia.

He is a bright man who managed to keep them in their home for many years despite their diagnoses. His wife became progressively worse and inevitably they had to leave their home of 50 years. While in assisted living, she began to demonstrate highly agitated behavior. The staff recognized her rapid decline and often suggested they move to separate quarters.

He refused. He chose to stay by his wife's side as long as he could. After all, he is devoted to her.

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