



HUMOR HELPS

JANE: Humor keeps us sane. As we know, there are periods when your loved one is in pain and you are on high alert and you can freak out. But we need to remember to laugh even when it hurts. When I married you knowing you had Crohn's, humor seemed like a logical way to handle my anxiety about what was happening to

you and to make you feel comfortable with what was going on with your body. Perhaps we use humor that other people wouldn't find funny. But it works for us.

MICHAEL: It has helped. You have been a great, positive force for me. You have helped draw me out so I don't feel so alone. This disease can be difficult and embarrassing, and most people don't want to discuss it. When I first was diagnosed I was in junior high and my friends and family really didn't understand. When the doctor first described it to my mother, calling it terminal ileitis, she immediately burst into tears thinking I was going to die, because he said the word "terminal." I've done a lot of explaining over the years.

J: When you and I met, you were pretty close-mouthed about it. We were dating for a while before you dropped the little gem at dinner — that you had Crohn's.

M: Yeah, I just sort of slipped it in there. "Oh, by the way..."

CODE WORDS KEEP YOU CLOSE

J: When we were first dating and you were embarrassed about how long you spent in the bathroom, you would say, "I have to go have a situation," remember? And then years later, when "The Situation Room" premiered on CNN, we just cracked up. I still smile every time that show comes on.

M: We also call your car "the ambulette," because it makes such frequent trips to the ER. Personally, I think we should put a red cross on the side.

MICHAEL FORESTER AND JANE HELLER say humor is their salvation. Laughing has helped them to cope with the issues that inevitably arise during 20 years of marriage and to face the particular challenges posed by Michael's experience with Crohn's disease.

Jane, a bestselling author, recently released a book entitled, *You'd Better Not Die Or I'll Kill You: A Caregiver's Survival Guide to Keeping You in Good Health and Good Spirits*. The book reflects on the experience of taking care of loved ones with a chronic or progressive illness. In the book, Michael and Jane make public some of their private moments living with Crohn's. They sat down recently for a conversation that gives a little glimpse into their sometimes difficult, sometimes joyful, but always inspiring journey, complete with a dash of their trademark humor.

These words are things that we can say in public and people don't really understand what we are talking about — which can be a good thing!

J: I think these funny code words give us a way to not take the meaning of them as seriously. It can give a sense of intimacy that, let's face it, is sometimes lacking when you are dealing with this disease. Crohn's may not be "romantic," but there are many ways to feel close to another person.

JOY IN LAUGHTER

J: There was a time early in our marriage when we really didn't understand what was happening with your illness. You were on steroids and in a clinical depression. You weren't able to laugh or have any sense of joy about life. Thankfully, that dark period is long over, but now when I hear you laugh it is the most joyous sound. Part roar and part cackle — I wish I could bottle it up and give it to others. Every time I hear it, I remind myself how lucky we are that you can laugh now.

M: That was a very dark period and I'm glad I'm out of it. At first when I read the manuscript of your book, I wasn't sure if I wanted to share all these personal details with the world. But I decided that this is the reality of my experience with Crohn's and if it can help someone else, I can feel good about it.

ONE LAST LAUGH

J: The title of the book is a reference to the fact that I always say, "You'd better not die or I'll kill you!" before they wheel you in for surgery. I've also said I refuse to go on Match.com at this point in my life!

M: I'd rather be sent off with a smile. Before my last surgery, when I left you — you know, after you'd admonished me not to die — two technicians in the ER asked if I wanted to listen to music before I went under. I asked for Led Zeppelin and they put on the song "Dazed and Confused." We had a nice laugh and off I went. ■

Do you have a dialogue suggestion? Please email it to CrohnsAdvocate@Biosector2.com.