

The Tough & Tender Caregiver

by David and Rhonda Travland

Reviewed by Terri Corcoran

David and Rhonda Travland were both well spouses who experienced, in their words, “caregiver hell.” They had excruciating situations with their respective ill spouses, which they admit to not having handled very well for several years. Today, David, a psychologist with years of experience in marital counseling, and Rhonda, a geriatric care manager, are married to each other, having divorced their ill spouses. It was a long, harrowing journey for them both; and with battle scars still fresh in their memory, they have written *The Tough & Tender Caregiver (TTC): A Handbook for the Well Spouse*, which they call an “owner’s manual for caregiving marriages.”

With extensive detail, the Travlands present strategies and coping mechanisms by which caregiving spouses can not only survive their difficult lives, but thrive as individuals – whether they live with their ill spouse, place them in assisted living or nursing facilities, or divorce them (divorce being the absolute last but sometimes necessary resort). The Travlands surely do understand us well spouses, down to every grievous, frustrating experience and emotion we have dealt with and felt. It is always comforting to read the words of people who have been where we well spouses are and who can describe our most unpleasant and uncomfortable innermost feelings.

David and Rhonda truly care about their fellow well spouses and desperately want to help us all create decent lives out of our tragic and overwhelming circumstances. Their road map for this life improvement plan is very well thought out. One cautionary note: Some caregivers reading this book may feel that some suggestions may bring on more stress in their particular situations, so some selectivity is needed to adopt those suggestions — and there are many — that will be helpful.

The main theme of *The TTC* is that no matter how difficult our lives are, each of us alone is responsible for making our own happiness and seeing that our needs are met. The Travlands try to dispel many social myths and adages that keep us

grounded in misery, and they teach practical skills - especially effective relationship building with the ill spouse, extended family and friends. As they point out, “the main culprit is the social tradition that puts interpersonal skills near the bottom of our collective educational agenda. Since we acquire such ‘people’ skills haphazardly, our knowledge of the principles which govern relationships is full of holes. Without a workable fund of knowledge, we fall prey to our emotions.”

There are extensive instructions for “renegotiating” the marriage contract when chronic illness occurs, keeping pie charts and ledgers to make the well spouse aware of his/her needs and how those needs are being met, and other comprehensive analyses and tactics for building a better caregiving life. The book is fraught with business language such as “return on [relationship] investments” and “limited [relationship] investments” — the authors are quite forceful and direct in their advice. As they say, “The Tough and Tender Caregiver is firmly in touch with reality. TTCs understand themselves, their environment, and how to make themselves comfortable in their environment. They know what they need, what is available and how to get it. Because conditions change, TTCs realize they must be constantly open to new learning in order to stay in touch with reality. They are always prepared to give up what they believe and substitute something new.”

The Tough & Tender Caregiver offers lots of valuable insight and information, but as comprehensive as it is, it is still basically one perspective on the well spouse situation. Other spousal caregivers may have different perspectives and may find the author’s no-nonsense, unsentimental, prescriptive approach a bit unsettling. But we do each need to find our own way, and the Travlands offer us all hope that we CAN find our own way to more fulfilling lives.

