



BY MARIA LALLY AND ALISON PALMER

'TIL SICKNESS DO US PART

Men are seven times more likely than women to leave if their partner is seriously ill, according to a shocking new survey. *Grazia* explores why

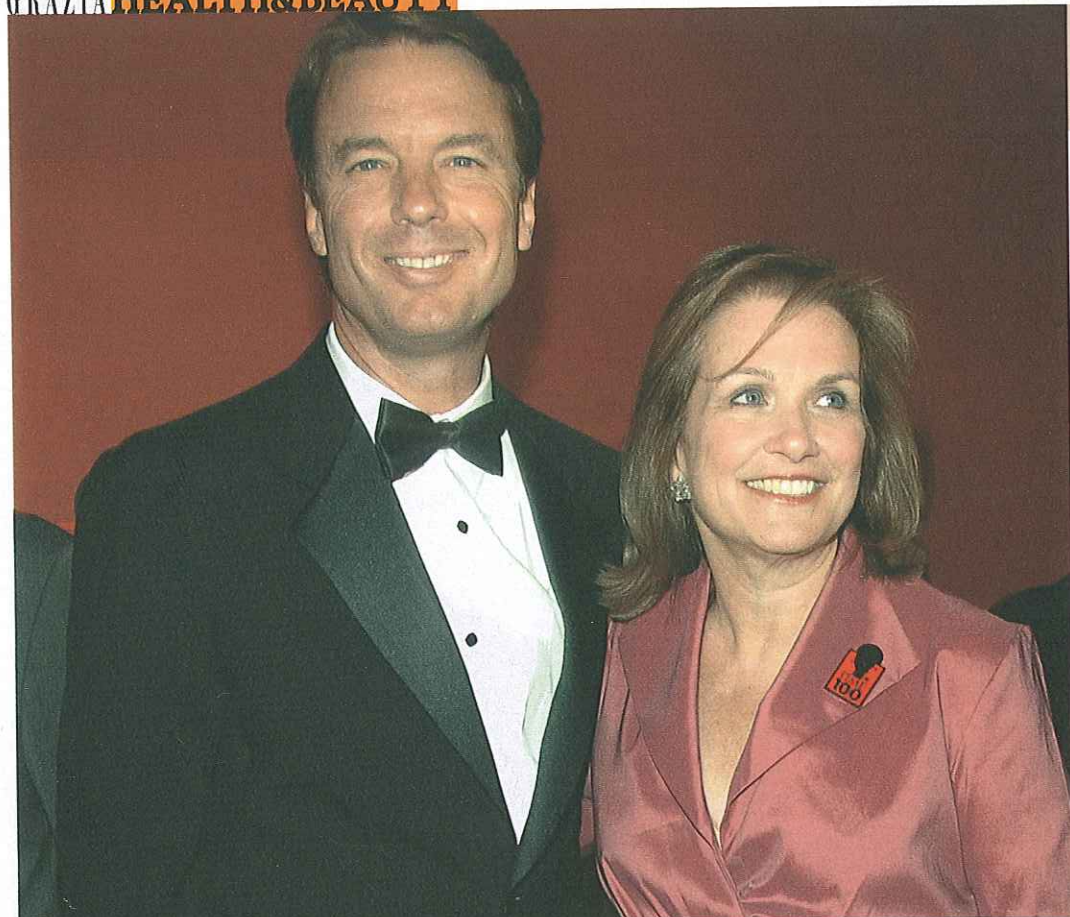
'WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH A BRAIN TUMOUR AT 28, I didn't think life could get worse,' says Emma*, a marketing executive from Edinburgh. 'But then two weeks after my surgery and just before I was due to start six weeks of radiotherapy, my husband of one year announced he needed "time apart" because he was having trouble coping. I couldn't believe it. We'd been together since university and he was by my side, gripping my hand, when I was first diagnosed. With everything else falling apart around me, I thought he'd be the rock in the middle. Instead, I had to move in with my mum and undergo treatment without him.'

Shockingly, Emma's story isn't an isolated one. A recent American study looked at 500

marriages where one partner became life-threateningly ill: 21 per cent ended when the wife became unwell, compared to just three per cent when the husband did. Another US study, by the National Center for Health Statistics, found that 75 per cent of first-time marriages end in divorce if one partner becomes seriously ill, and medical journal *Cancer* recently found that a husband is seven times more likely than a wife to leave a marriage if a partner becomes sick.

Elizabeth Edwards, wife of US politician John Edwards, has just written a book – *Resilience* (£9.99, Broadway) – about being diagnosed with breast cancer then finding out her husband had started an affair during her treatment. The affair forced Edwards to pull out of 2008's Presidential race.

Author Marc Silver reveals how hard he found it when his own wife was diagnosed, and describes himself at the time as 'far from the perfect caregiver'. 'I also heard far too many stories of men who abandoned their partners or cheated,' he tells *Grazia*. 'So I looked for studies to shed some light on the topic.' His resulting book, *Breast Cancer* ▶



Husband: How To Help Your Wife (And Yourself) Through Diagnosis, Treatment, And Beyond (£9.99, Rodale Press), went to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Amanda, 42, from Surrey tells us: 'I met my ex-partner James* in 2006, just after my divorce. He was gentle, kind, funny and we fell for each other within a few months.

'Then, last September, I found a lump in my breast. I panicked and called James at work, who simply said, "Get it checked out then." I was a bit taken aback by his lack of concern, but later that night he cuddled me and reassured me everything would be OK. I saw my GP, who referred me for a mammogram. While I was waiting for it, James wouldn't discuss it with me and started to refuse sex. He also said he hated hospitals, so would rather not go with me.

'On the day of my appointment, I took along my sister and got the news I'd been dreading – it was probably cancer, and a later biopsy revealed it was a particularly aggressive type. James was shocked and didn't know what to say, so he just kept repeating I'd be fine. We started rowing, with me accusing him of not caring and him clamming up. Eventually, I walked out. On the day of my surgery he texted me to say he hoped all went well. I felt totally abandoned. After my treatment, he got back in touch and we limped along for a while. Then I had more treatment, which left me ill and exhausted, and he went cold again. We decided to end it – I wanted him to fight for me, but he didn't.

'I can appreciate it's frightening to watch someone you love suffer, but I needed James

to be strong for me. I'm now in remission and in a new and loving relationship with a man who attends every check-up with me.

Psychologist and relationship expert Susan Quilliam says, 'I've seen this situation time and time again. Men's personalities are very different. They're natural-born problem-solvers. Illness isn't an easy thing to fix, and sometimes there's no fix for it at all. This can make men feel invalidated. It frightens them and they withdraw emotionally. Another problem is women tend to have larger support groups: caring friends, sisters and mothers. It's easy to compare your partner's response to someone who does and says everything you need to hear.'

Not all men, however, will leave after diagnosis. 'Far from it,' says Susan. 'Men are wonderful and really step up. These men tend to be much more honest with their partners, and tell them how frightened they are instead of staying "strong" and silent.'

Tamara, 36, who was diagnosed with cancer last year, says, 'I was very bleak and told my husband I feared I would die, leaving our two children motherless. He couldn't bring himself to reassure me and just looked terrified. Then I came home from a night with my sister's with the kids to find he'd left a note – a note! – saying: "Sorry, I'm not coping very well. I don't think I'm strong enough to cope with this." I was gobsmacked and left me more devastated than the cancer.'

'He called a few days later sounding broken, and I ended up reassuring him I would be OK and that we'd get through if we stuck together as a family. Eventually we patched things up. But it took me a long time to forgive him. Even now I keep my fear of the cancer returning from him in case he has a similar reaction.'

Stuart Danskin from Macmillan Cancer Support – whose recent survey reveals 32 per cent of cancer patients say their relationships comes under 'huge strain' after a diagnosis – says, 'We advise men to be honest about their fears. We would encourage a man with a sick partner to a helpline, talk to a friend or read a self-help book if he needs advice on how to cope.'

Marc Silver says, 'I had to figure out pretty quickly what to do. Cheer her up? Commiserate? Keep silent and hope the mood would pass? I also had to reassure the kids that everything would be OK, even when I wasn't sure it would be.' His first piece of advice? 'Just be there for your wife, listen to what she's saying, don't belittle, and offer assistance where it's needed and wanted. To contact Macmillan call 0808 808 000 or visit www.macmillan.org.uk ■

ILLNESS ISN'T EASY TO FIX. THIS CAN MAKE A MAN FEEL INVALIDATED

Above:
Elizabeth and
John Edwards
– who began
an affair while
she was
undergoing
cancer
treatment