

Stuck in Love

Sarah met her husband Christopher in an outdoors store ten years ago. They hit it off right away. They spent long hours climbing, taking backpacking trips and generally connecting over their mutual love of the outdoors. Eventually, they decided to get married. They were happily married for six years until Christopher had a tragic climbing accident. On one of their excursions, Christopher's harness broke and he fell 50 feet, becoming paralyzed from the waist down. The accident was tragic for both of them, and Sarah did all she could to comfort Christopher during his recovery and adaptation to life as a paraplegic.

Four years later, life has continued for Sarah and Christopher, but Sarah feels as though more has been lost than Christopher's ability to walk. Although they have some other things in common, the core of their relationship had always been their shared love of outdoor activities. Now that many of these activities are off the table for them, Sarah feels as though she and Christopher are drifting apart. She still loves hiking and climbing, and Christopher still supports her interest in these activities. But there is a limit to how much Sarah can enjoy these activities now (especially with Christopher), and when she enjoys these activities without Christopher, she feels guilty for leaving him behind. Meanwhile, Christopher is developing new interests, for example in reading, writing, and painting, that Sarah fully supports but has very little interest in herself. To the degree that she tries to share these new interests, she feels frustrated by her inability to do so. And to the degree that she does not, she worries that this will make her and Christopher grow even further apart.

Sarah tries to make the relationship work for as long as she can, but in spite of her best efforts she feels unfulfilled. So, now that Christopher has largely adjusted to his new life and is relatively independent again (though he does still benefit from her care and support), Sarah starts to wonder if their relationship still makes sense. Yes, Sarah loves Christopher and takes the commitment she made to him very seriously, but the relationship they previously had is gone and she no longer feels happy. Although she vowed to stay with Christopher through sickness and health, she thinks they might both be happier apart (or at least that she might be).

At the same time, Sarah feels ashamed of herself for even considering leaving Christopher. If she vowed to stay with him through sickness and health, how can she now desert him simply because of the consequences of his accident? She thinks about how harshly she would judge people who leave their partners who have been diagnosed with cancer or other illnesses, and wonders whether her situation is any different. When she thinks about such cases, she feels like there is something morally bad about leaving your partner as a result of this kind of development, and that a truly good person would renew their commitment to their partner in such a situation instead of breaking it. And yet, she thinks, she can't help the fact that she feels unfulfilled, and she also can't prevent herself from having these feelings.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is Sarah blameworthy for feeling unfulfilled in her relationship with Christopher?
2. Is it morally permissible to break a commitment to your partner in a situation like this?
3. Is it morally permissible to make a commitment that you are not certain you will be able to keep?

