

FAMILY *matters*



‘I worry that I’ll be a burden on my family’

Karen Lewis was just 51 when doctors dropped the bombshell that she had Alzheimer’s disease. Nearly one year on, Karen and her family, from Rhondda Cynon Taf in Wales, talk about her devastating diagnosis

‘**W**hen my partner Jason proposed to me three years ago, we were in no hurry to tie the knot. We knew that we were together for the long haul. What was the rush?

All that changed in January when our world was blown apart as the doctor told me bluntly: “You have Alzheimer’s disease.” I was just 51, my youngest child Amy was 15, and in those four words, the future I’d always imagined for us all was snatched away. The wedding suddenly took on a sense of urgency. Heartbreakingly, the main reason for moving it forward to this month is so that I’m able to remember the day. My wonderful family – Jason, 45, Amy, now 16, and my sons Sam, 27, and David, 21 – are worried that if we leave it too long, my illness will have worsened.

Saying those vows will be incredibly emotional. I’ll be making promises to Jason that, due to my illness, I might find hard to keep, while he will vow to stand by me no matter what. And, if there’s

one certainty right now, we know that life is going to get much harder.

I first worried that something was wrong a year ago when I worked as a pharmacy dispenser. While putting together prescriptions, I found myself having to check I’d got them right several times. I was so scared of making a mistake. “I keep forgetting things and I don’t know what’s wrong,” I confessed to a colleague.

My GP referred me for tests, which eventually led to the specialist dropping the bombshell at the start of this year. Looking back, there had been other signs that had been easy to dismiss; I kept repeating myself and would drop things. Trying to say something to Jason about our television, I couldn’t remember the word, instead calling it “that square on the wall”.

The moment the doctor told me what was wrong, family life changed. I cried solidly for a week. I get angrier now and I’m less rational. Poor Amy and Jason bear the brunt of it. It’s partly because

I’m so frustrated and angry, and partly a symptom of the illness.

While I take medication to ease the symptoms, I know that, since I was signed off last September, I won’t work again. But I’m learning to change my life and the way I look at things for the better, too. I keep a diary, writing down how I feel about my children and two grandchildren. I want them all to know how proud I am of them, so that they’ll never forget.

Amy’s two brothers no longer live at home, and I think it has been particularly hard on her. She’s a lovely girl, and I hate putting this burden on her. She doesn’t like talking about my Alzheimer’s – but I believe that talking about my condition will help her come to terms with it.

Jason has been amazing, too. He copes by taking it one day at a time, and, for now, there are still good days when you wouldn’t know there’s anything wrong with me, but he’s there for the bad days, too – and