

Being a Breast Cancer Husband

I get a lot of questions about sex and intimacy after cancer—all different types of cancer, for both men and women. I've run therapy groups for women, post-cancer treatment, to try to help normalize their concerns and to help them realize that they can have a pleasurable sex life after cancer. This month; however, I chose to answer a question about sex and intimacy after cancer, from the husband of a survivor. Partners of cancer survivors often have their own worries, concerns, and in many cases, vicarious sexual trauma. I received the email below from a husband whose wife is a breast cancer survivor. After years of helping her battle breast cancer, he found himself struggling with sexual dysfunction. I hope that sharing his story will encourage others to share theirs. All names and identifiable information have been changed or omitted to protect the source(s).

Dear Dianna,

About three years ago, my wife had breast cancer. At first, I think we were both in shock and I did my best to be there for her and just do whatever she needed me to do. I knew that the chemotherapy treatments were going to be really hard on her body, and I feel like we were as prepared as we could be. After the treatments started, nausea and fatigue became a regular part of our life, and eventually she lost all of her hair. I think we tried to have sex a few times, but the chemo also made her have vaginal pain and dryness. After a while, I felt terrible even thinking about bringing it up—even her joints ached with pain. Most of the time, we would still cuddle, but even then, I was worried about hurting her. She had a double mastectomy and eventually decided to go through with reconstruction surgeries with implants. After all this time, it seemed like instead of being her husband, I had taken on the role of being her caretaker (cooking, cleaning up vomit, helping her in and out of bed, cleaning wounds after surgery, taking care of the drains they put in by emptying them and measuring the fluid that came out, helping her bathe and shower...pretty much everything during the times when she was overcome with fatigue). I'm not complaining. I love my wife and I would do it all again if I had to.

So, like I said, it's been three years and now she's feeling better about her body, they've given her hormone creams and lubricants for pain, and she's started having some sexual desire again. It's great. I feel like all of our prayers have been answered—she's alive and healthy. Except now when we try to have sex, I just can't. We use the creams and lubricants and she says she's "ready," but there's a problem with me now. I don't know if I'm still afraid of hurting her? Or if taking care of her like that for so long changed things? Maybe I just got used to handling those needs for myself? I don't know...but it's killing our marriage! I just can't stay hard when we try. And she's convinced I'm not attracted to her anymore, because of all of the scars and things. She just doesn't believe that whatever the problem is, it's with me, not her. I don't know how to help her understand how *her* breast cancer is related to *my* erectile dysfunction, but that it's not her fault. Please help me figure this out.

~Breast Cancer Husband

Dear Breast Cancer Husband,

My goodness, you have been through quite a lot. First, let me commend you on how well it seems you did in caring for your wife and in how much effort you put into being attentive and supportive to her during such a difficult time for you both. Given the details you've described, I have no doubt that you were with her every step of the way. She's quite fortunate to have had such a loving and supportive partner. Second, I want to remind you that recovering from cancer is a team effort—you dealt with it as a team, and now you need to recover from it as a team.

Judging by the questions you're asking me, I can tell you have some very good insights into what *might* be the problem for you. It could very well be one, or all of the issues you've suggested. Marriage, as I'm sure you know, is difficult terrain to navigate all on its own, without the added difficulty of a major medical issue. Just as relationships are intricate and complicated, I imagine the solution to your problem may be as well. What I can tell you; however, is that given your circumstances, psychological Erectile Dysfunction (ED) is quite normal (and easily treatable) especially for couples that already have a loving and supportive relationship. You and your wife have been through so much together, this is just one more hurdle—and hopefully your last. Since you will need her help to work through this, I would suggest you share with her the same worries you've shared with me. I think she may be better able to support you if she has a better understanding of your experience of the problem.

Normally, I would suggest you see your medical doctor to rule out any medical cause for your ED. It's always a good idea to make sure you're not missing an underlying medical issue that could be causing the problem. The reason why I'm assuming that it's psychological for you is because you shared that you've been “handling those needs” by yourself, and you didn't mention it being an issue when you're by yourself. Thus, it stands to reason that it is related to being sexually intimate with your wife.

It makes sense that you may still be afraid of causing her pain, especially if she's still trying to work through that issue herself. The hormone creams you mentioned are generally prescribed to help manage vaginal pain and reverse some of the problems caused by chemotherapy (like a thinning of the vaginal walls; vaginal dryness, early onset of menopause, etc.). They might have given her a dilator set to use, to help her improve vaginal elasticity. If that is the case, perhaps that's something you can do together? Overtime, it may help you to see that penetration no longer causes her pain. If or when you feel ready to try again, it may also help if you suggest that your wife takes the position of being on top, to lessen your worry about hurting her. With her on top, she'll be able to move as gently and easily as she may need, and you won't have to worry about your body weight on top of her being an issue.

You have been functioning as her caregiver for the past several years. That very well can cause a shift in the dynamic of your relationship, and how you view her as a sexual being. If that's the case, we need to work on helping you shift it back. Now that she no longer needs you to be her caregiver, you have to learn how to be her lover again. I'm sure it took time to “condition” you to be her caregiver, and now it's going to take time to “recondition” yourself back to being her husband and lover. You're not in this relationship alone. Perhaps she's gotten used to you being her caregiver and needs to be reminded that you also need to feel attractive and sexually desired. Just as I'm sure you were handed instructions from the hospital about “how to care for a cancer patient,” I'm suggesting you “care for your marriage” with these *instructions* for having a healthy sex life. This is something that you both need to put effort into doing on a regular basis. This includes: daily acts of affection, going out for “date night” once per week, focusing on romantic

gestures, expressing words of affirmation, giving each other full body massages to increase comfort with sensual touch again, and regular naked cuddling (to increase feelings of closeness and intimacy).

You both might try to see this as an opportunity to explore your “new” sexuality together. Things may feel very different for her, and it’s important to be sensitive to that; but it is also an opportunity for the two of you to try new things with each other. Try to be playful with each other during this learning process. Take the focus off of achieving an orgasm, and instead focus on giving and receiving sensations of sexual pleasure.

~Dianna

If you or someone you know is struggling with a similar issue, there are many resources out there to help. Listed below are suggested resources for further reading. Open and honest communication is paramount during this process. If either of you is extremely uncomfortable talking openly about sex and intimacy, I suggest you seek out the help of a trained professional, to help you discuss these topics as a couple and work through any problems as they arise.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Breast Cancer Husband: How to Help Your Wife (and Yourself) Through Diagnosis, Treatment, and Beyond, by Marc Silver.

Couples Confronting Cancer: Keeping Your Relationship Strong, by Joy L. Fincannon and Katherine V. Bruss.

You Can't Fix Everything: A Husband's Perspective on Dealing with Breast Cancer, by John W. Boyd

Stand by Her: A Breast Cancer Guide for Men, by John W. Anderson

Sexuality and Fertility After Cancer, by Leslie R. Schover

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Dr. Dianna Palimere is a Psychosexual Therapist and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She has been working in the field of mental health for the past 13 years, dedicating the past eight years to specializing in clinical sexuality. She holds a Bachelors degree in Psychology, a Masters degree in Social Work, a Masters degree in Human Sexuality Education, and a PhD in Clinical Human Sexuality. Utilizing a holistic approach to therapy, she incorporates a variety of clinical interventions in her work with individuals, couples, and families. She is devoted to helping people achieve sexual health and healing through her work as a psychotherapist in her private practice in Pike Creek, DE; as well as in her work with local nonprofit organizations. To learn more about her or to schedule an appointment, visit her website:

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