

Sex and Intimacy...After Cancer

Being diagnosed with any kind of cancer can be a life altering experience. When the type of cancer directly affects your sexuality, sexual functioning, and/or how you see yourself as a sexual being, it can be even more devastating. Many clients that I have treated who struggled with sexual issues and concerns post cancer treatment shared stories with me about how their doctors dealt with the sexual aspect of their treatment. A common theme among them was that they were told by their doctors that they should “just be happy to be alive” and “not worry so much” about how their body now looked or functioned *sexually*. Unfortunately, for many people it is difficult to find happiness in their life, when their sexuality has been impacted so greatly by the damaging effects of cancer and treatments for cancer. This month, I’m hoping to help people start a dialog about an issue that, in my opinion, desperately needs more attention. After all, the numbers of cancer cases in our area are some of the highest in the nation.

According to Delaware’s Division of Public Health, in 2008, Delaware ranked 5th highest in the nation for breast cancer in women age 40 and older. In the same year, Delaware also led the nation in prostate cancer, lung cancer, and colorectal cancer. While the rates for breast cancer and colorectal cancer seem to have slightly decreased from 2008 to 2010, prostate cancer cases have “dramatically increased.” The 2010 report listed prostate cancer with the highest rates (178 cases per 100,000 people); followed by breast cancer (122.6 cases per 100,000 people); in third place was lung cancer (80.5); fourth was colorectal (51.7); and fifth was uterine (28.2—a 20% increase since the last reported study in 1996). Given these numbers, it makes me wonder who is talking to all of these individuals about the possible impact that cancer may have on their sexual functioning, body image, intimate relationships, etc.? After we have reflected on the miracle of life and expressed our gratitude for still being alive, we need to have a conversation about the quality of the life we are now living—including our sex life.

Cancer and its treatment(s) can have both psychological and physical effects on one’s sexuality. The most common sexuality-related issues reported by cancer survivors are:

- Loss of interest in sex
- Problems with body-image
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulty communicating sexual thoughts and feelings to their partner
- Grief around loss of sexual functioning
- Grief around loss of body parts removed due to cancer

- For women: negative body image, early onset of menopause, vaginal dryness, loss of sensitivity in breasts or other areas, difficulty achieving orgasm, pain during intercourse, and/or infertility due to cancer treatments
- For men: negative body image, erectile dysfunction, low sexual desire/libido, loss of sensitivity in penis or scrotum (depending on the type and location of the cancer), and/or infertility due to cancer treatments

Where to start?

The most important thing for cancer survivors to recognize is that what they are experiencing is normal and there are resources out there to help you through it. **You can have a happy and healthy sex life after cancer.** Talk to your doctor about your concerns and ask about possible treatments, such as hormone replacement therapy. If you are in a relationship, talk to your partner about what you are going through and listen to their thoughts and feelings as well. I have found that with many couples, feelings of guilt (because the survivor has lost interest in sex) or shame (because the survivor no longer feels good about their body) prevent them from having open and honest conversations about what's happening—or not happening, in the bedroom. It turns into a perpetual cycle where the longer it goes without anyone talking about it, the worse the problem becomes. The couple then becomes less connected and resentments start to build.

If you are reading this and you are already caught in this cycle, it will take baby steps to navigate your way out. Be patient. After you talk to your doctor about treatment options, find some books, videos, or other resources to help you navigate your way through it (see my Resource recommendations below). If you are in a relationship, talk to your partner and try to get them involved in addressing your sexual concerns with you. The key to fixing intimacy issues is to take the focus off of sexual intercourse and instead focus on safety, connection, touch, and pleasurable sensation. Some possible activities include: giving each other a sensual massage; naked cuddling; kissing/hugging; and taking a bath together.

If you are having difficulty managing the issue on your own, seek the counsel of a good sex therapist. Sex and intimacy may not be the same for you as it was before cancer, but with a firm commitment to working on the issue, you can create a new sex life—and with time and attention, it may end up being even BETTER than your old one!

Resources

Books:

Intimacy After Cancer, by Sally Kydd & Dana Rowett

Sexuality & Fertility After Cancer, by Leslie Schover

Couples Confronting Cancer: Keeping Your Relationship Strong, by Joy Fincannon & Katherine Bruss

Up Front: Sex and the Post-Mastectomy Woman, by Linda Dackman

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

Audiotapes:

How to Talk with a Partner About Smart Sex, by Zilbergeld & Barbach

Videos:

A Significant Journey: Breast Cancer Survivors and the Men Who Love Them

Best Look Forward (A video with advice from makeup artists and hairdressers to women about looking their best during chemotherapy).

Support Groups:

Cancer Support Community (with locations throughout Delaware). See their website for times and locations at: www.cancersupportdelaware.org

Christiana Care Health System. See their website for various groups, locations, and resources at: www.christianacare.org/cancercommunityservices

Sex Therapy Group for Cancer Survivors. Located in Pike Creek, DE. For more information, see <http://www.sextherapyindelaware.com/Upcoming-Groups.php>

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Dr. Dianna Palimere is a Psychosexual Therapist and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She has been in the field of mental health for the past 11 years, dedicating the past six 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: www.SexTherapyInDelaware.com.