Sexuality, Intimacy and Relationships in Survivorship: A Quality of Life Issue

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What to Expect

I. Define Sexuality and Intimacy
II. Broadly explore the possible effects of cancer and its treatment on intimacy & sexual health
III. Options/tips/ideas
IV. Open dialogue, questions and discussion
Intimacy is Important to Quality of Life

“Part of your quality of life includes your sexual health…”
Factors that Contribute to Sexual Challenges

1) the cancer
2) psychological distress (including partner)
3) cancer therapy
4) side effects & long term effects
5) alterations in relationships
Commonly Experienced Sexual Challenges

- **Men**
  - Erectile Dysfunction
  - Changes in desire/interest
  - Changes in orgasmic intensity
  - Issues related to stoma/ostomy

- **Women**
  - Effects of premature menopause
  - Vaginal changes
  - Changes in orgasmic intensity
  - Issues related to stoma/ostomy
Physiologic Alterations in Men

- neurovascular damage resulting in erectile dysfunction (ED)
  - chemotherapy agents, radiation, surgery
- hormone changes
- infertility
- fatigue and decreased physical stamina
- male children treated for cancer may experience delayed or absent puberty
Physiologic Alterations in Women

- hormone changes
  - acute or premature ovarian failure
- consequences of menopause
- vaginal pain disorders
  - radiation, surgery, chemotherapy
- fatigue and decreased physical stamina
- female children treated for cancer may experience delayed or absent puberty
Impact on Sexual-Self and Intimate Relationships

- Experience of distress
- Loss of libido (emotional and physical)
- Social life changes; role changes
- Fear of recurrence or talking about the cancer (survivor, partner and friends)
- Changes in body image (incl. weight)
- Reproductive concerns
- Other quality of life issues
Now What?

Questions and Answers to Common Concerns
Improving Performance

- Rule out any other contributing factors (i.e. medications) that could be altered
- Evaluate mutual expectations with partner
- Communicate about desires and needs (Fact, Belief, Feeling, Action)
- Go back to some of the basics (handholding, cuddling, lighting candle)
- Unless you try, you will never know
Improving Sexual Function: Men

- Erectile Dysfunction
  - Viagra, Levitra, Cialis
  - Penile Pump
  - Muse or Caverject
  - Cognitive and Behavioral techniques

- Loss of Interest
  - Have hormones tested
  - Is it depression?
  - Cognitive and Behavioral techniques
  - Mismatched expectations?
  - Mind over matter/Erotic Focus
Improving Sexual Function: Women

- **Vaginal Health:**
  - Artificial lubrication:
    - Internal vs. more external lubrication
  - Stretch, Strengthen, Moisturize
  - Eros-C

- **Interest:**
  - New DSM 5 description
  - Have hormones assessed
  - Mismatched expectations
  - Body vs Mind expectations
  - Erotic focus
“I don’t feel attractive”

- Focus on the things that haven’t changed
- Get to know the new external you and remember the internal is the same
- Wear clothing that helps you feel confident
- Understand how to manage any symptoms or side effects
- Start with self-touch exercises
- Be around people who make you feel safe & loved
- Be patient! Recovery takes time...
Fear of Rejection

When do I tell someone I am romantically interested in that I have/had cancer?
  ◦ Remember cancer is part of your story
  ◦ Practice disclosure with a friend
  ◦ Is there a right or wrong time?
  ◦ Your desires may have changed since your diagnosis
  ◦ Make sure you are informed so you can answer all questions
For the Couple

- Be creative...get back to the basics
- Communicate, communicate, communicate...we don’t read minds!
  - State Fact, Belief, Feelings and Action
- See a therapist to help work through road blocks
- Remember problems prior to cancer do not magically disappear
For the Partner

- Communicate about your own desires – this is not selfish or insensitive
- Be honest
- Focus on all the other sensitive areas of your partner
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions of your partner or the health care staff
- Show affection in a relaxed way, showing you are still interested
Maintaining Intimate Moments

- Identify or create your “new normal”
- Create a sensual mood.
- Schedule a “date” (with friends and partner)
- Take a weekend trip to “escape” and relax
- Be positive...practice positive statements
- Tell your partner about your worries or fears
- Schedule time with friends
Things to Remember

- Appropriate timing of activity may increase enjoyment of sex
- Get creative
- Communicate about your needs
- Rest during sex; it’s not a marathon
- Sex is not the only form of intimacy
- Patience and a sense of humor is a must
- Skin is the largest sex organ and the brain is the most important sex organ – the possibilities are limitless!
Thank you!

Questions?
For the Couple

- Sensate focus exercises:
  - Use touch and massage to stimulate closeness
  - Focus on areas of the body that do not stimulate distress
  - Genital touching is discouraged during first weeks of exercise
Sensate Focus Exercise

- Each partner takes a turn touching and being touched. Try many types of touching, varying light stroking and a firmer touch, as in a massage.
  - One partner lies face down on the bed, allowing the other partner to touch the entire back, from toes to scalp
  - Turn over (after ~15 min) so the front of the body can be touched
  - While being touched pay attention to your own feelings
  - When you are doing the touching, enjoy the shape and texture of your partner's body
  - The first touching session should avoid genitals and breasts. Your goals are to feel relaxed and to experience sensual pleasure. It is not important to get sexually excited.
Sensate Focus Exercise

2. If you both feel relaxed during the first touching session, you can add some genital touching the next time
   - Over several sessions, partners can slowly spend more time on genital touching, until each one can reach an orgasm
   - Stroking with a hand or through oral sex, if that is comfortable for both of you. Penetration not necessary or recommended for several sessions, if at all.