

INTIMACY AND CANCER

By Melissa, M. Thompson, MSW, LCSW

HOW CANCER AND ITS TREATMENT EFFECT INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY

Human beings have the natural desire to be touched, hugged, caressed & loved. Whether this is fulfilled in a partnership or by close friendships, most people desire close relationships that involve intimacy at some level. Sexuality & intimacy are not life or death issues – but are real quality of life issues. Oftentimes I hear people say “This sex thing should be the last thing on my mind in the mist of all the other things in my life”. Or a partner says, “It's selfish of me to be concerned about sex.”

~ Sage Bolte, ABD, LCSW, OSW-C, Oncology Counselor

Sexuality and intimacy are often impacted by a cancer diagnosis. This topic is an extremely personal one and it is understandable that these issues are often not the primary focus while someone is going through treatment. Once the immediate crisis of diagnosis and treatment pass, sexual feelings and how to express them become important to caregivers and survivors. I often hear this frustration expressed by clients: “When my partner and I most need to feel close and safe, the treatment and experience of cancer seems like it is taking away our ability to be intimate.” Of course, everyone with a cancer diagnosis does not experience challenges with regards to sexuality and intimacy. And often if they do, it is only a temporary reaction during the initial stages of treatment and diagnosis. For some, however, the cancer experience does affect intimacy and sexuality.

Here are some common intimacy issues that cancer survivors face and some suggestions for coping with them:

PHYSICAL

One of the most common sexual changes for survivors is loss of desire. Fatigue, pain, and nausea impact our feelings of desire. Feeling like you've lost control over your body and other aspects of your life, and that cancer is all consuming, can deplete your physical and emotional reserves.

Physical changes that can impact your desire for intimacy	
Pain	Treatment side effects:
Post surgical appearance	Fatigue
Port or central line placement	Nausea
Weight gain or loss	Neuropathy
Hair loss	Vaginal dryness
Loss of control over one's body due to diagnosis and treatment	Erectile/Ejaculation issues

EMOTIONAL

There is a strong emotional impact on cancer survivors and their loved ones. These affect your and your partner's desire for intimacy.

Emotional changes that can impact your desire for intimacy	
Fear	Stress:
Anger	Financial impact of treatment
Guilt	Employment
Worry	Questions about survival
Anxiety and depression	Embarrassment about body image
Grieving life before cancer	

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Both partners suddenly are afraid to express thoughts and feelings about intimacy. They worry they are being selfish for wanting to be intimate, when their partner is worried that they no longer find them attractive. It's what I refer to as 'the dance' – both of you are aware that there has been a decrease in intimacy, but neither of you wants to bring it up for discussion.

TREATMENT RESTRICTIONS AND INTERRUPTIONS

Be sure to discuss this topic in detail with your medical team. Each treatment is unique and they are most familiar with any precautions you may need to take while undergoing treatment. There are some common times during treatment when intimacy may be restricted:

Common Treatment Restrictions
White blood count below 1,000
Platelet count below 20,000
Required use of birth control

INTERRUPTIONS

By now you know that cancer treatment can create interruptions in your daily routine. Doctor's appointments, hospitalizations, tests become a priority when you are going through your treatment. These interruptions to your daily routine can interrupt communication with your partner. For cancer survivors, they often report using all their energy to get through treatment and end up feeling obligated to be intimate. Caregivers may feel the same way, or they feel selfish for asking more of the cancer survivor and do not discuss their needs to be intimate. Communicating your needs to your partner is crucial at this time, even if circumstances prevent you from participating in intimate activities. It's easy to get out of practice when you are away from an activity and it may take time to regain your intimacy equilibrium.

SUPPORT

Sexuality and intimacy are real quality of life issues for cancer survivors and their partners. They are often overlooked topics of discussion within the healthcare setting. Never hesitate to discuss these issues with your medical team members. They can provide you with direction and support that can help you with this real, quality of life issue.

Cancer can bring feelings of isolation and frustration that others do not understand your experience. Those that you have depended on for support in the past may not be able to provide what you need. This is to be expected, as your support network may not understand what you are going through. Support groups for survivors and caregivers are available and are quite effective in addressing these issues. Working with a counselor trained in oncology can help you work through the challenges cancer can present, including relationship issues such as intimacy. After all, you deserve to feel satisfied with your life while on the road to recovery.

Melissa M. Thompson, MSW, LCSW is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who specializes in working with cancer survivors and their families. In addition, she works with children, teens, and those facing the challenges of depression, anxiety, and chronic illness. She is a Clinical Specialist at Living Anew Cancer Support Services in St. Charles, IL and a professor in the graduate school of social work at Aurora University. She can be reached at mmtmsw@yahoo.com or 630 730 1828.