# How to Effectively Self-Advocate to Address Cancer-Related Sexual Dysfunction

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This article aims to guide you in becoming an effective self-advocate to address cancer-related sexual dysfunction with your cancer care team, other health care professionals, and intimate partner.

## Intimacy is important

Intimacy is essential to our quality of life. Sexual dysfunction can contribute to [emotional distress, depression, and a lower quality of life](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8339199/). Sexual dysfunction can be related to physical causes, psychological causes, or a combination of these, and it is vital to address.

*AfterCancer’s* Mission is to educate cancer care teams on the critical nature of addressing sexual dysfunction. Not all cancer care teams are there yet; often, their focus is your cancer care. You may need to broach the subject and advocate for yourself with your healthcare team. It’s important that you do, and we are here to help.

You can translate the tools you learn here to advocate for yourself in other situations. There are simple ways to make it less difficult to advocate for yourself.

## Journaling or logging your symptoms is a huge first step toward being an effective self-advocate

Journaling your symptoms or difficulties with intimacy will help you articulate them better to your intimate partner or cancer care team member. Discussing your [personal experiences](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7894983/) is a pillar component of effective self-advocacy.

* You will better recall what sensations or discomfort you experienced related to a particular interaction
* Your journal gives you an organized and prepared appearance with your provider
* Your journal is a tangible symbol of your intent to have a positive outcome
* Your journal gives you something to look at and hold to lend you strength

Keep your journal entries simple to avoid overwhelming yourself with your journal entries.

Journaling may help you figure out the root causes for a more effective conversation. Some examples are: sexual dysfunction may be related to fatigue. If you have kids, remember how hard it was to be intimate when sleep-deprived with a new baby? Some may be related to painful sex. Changing positions, and using lubricant, combined with warm, honest, and respectful communication with your intimate partner, may help. Journaling can help you in your conversation with your therapist concerning body image.

## Other steps to effective self-advocacy and collaboration with your healthcare team

A [**collaborative and engaged conversation**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7894983/)is another step toward advocating for yourself. Ask relevant questions and answer the questions asked of you openly and honestly.

Another step is **clearly stating what you need** if your provider or partner is distracted or intent on discussing other topics. Decline interventions you don’t want (Thomas et al., 2021), and avoid adversarial conversations or tones; they will be counterproductive to your goal. Once a conversation is started with your provider, it will be easier to continue at future appointments.

**Gain an** **understanding of your concern** by researching it on well-vetted sources before you see your provider or talk with your intimate partner. Even if your cancer center does not have a sexual dysfunction program, you can talk about what you believe you need if you educate yourself. You have an excellent start here at *AfterCancer.*Some other good resources are from the American Cancer Society:
[Sex and the Adult Male After Cancer](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects/sexuality-for-men-with-cancer.html) [Sex and the Adult Female with Cancer](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects/sexuality-for-women-with-cancer.html) [How Cancer and Cancer Treatment Can Effect Sexuality](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects/how-cancer-affects-sexuality.html)

Write your questions down in your journal for your healthcare team when you think of them.

Contact Member Services for your health insurance plan for any referrals you question that may be out of network and to confirm that services and treatments are covered and at what level.

## Advocating for yourself with your intimate partner

Studies have shown cancer survivors have an improved quality of life when they have an intimate [partner to share their feelings with](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects/how-cancer-affects-sexuality.html).

Be honest with your intimate partner about the [physical closeness](https://www.cancercare.org/publications/292-intimacy_during_and_after_cancer_treatment) you need. Share how you feel about your body. Some examples of this are: Erectile dysfunction (ED) can be hard to talk about but can be the elephant in the room; you can talk about how ED affects your day and how you are afraid your partner perceives you because of ED; maybe discuss changing gears to another type of sexual touching when ED occurs. Or talk about how your urostomy, ileostomy, or mastectomy makes you feel concerning your partner. You can use your trusty journal to help you articulate your thoughts and feelings.

If this seems too heavy to handle on your own, your cancer institute may have a licensed social worker who can see you for a counseling session to get you started on these topics. You may also have a local cancer support organization offering counseling and or support groups to discuss this. [www.CancerCare.org](http://www.CancerCare.org) has licensed social cancer-experienced social workers to assist, as well.

Actively [listening](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/i-hear-you/202105/7-tips-getting-through-difficult-conversations) to your partner is as important as sharing with them how you feel. Keep an open mind and the communication warm and positive. Be empathetic and mindfully stop yourself from going on the defensive.

Love yourself. Think of all the things you adore about yourself: some examples might be your laugh, your humor, and your love of history.

## Positive outcomes of self-advocacy to improve sexual function after cancer:

* You establish more control over your health and outcomes
* You gain a greater sense of [well-being](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7894983/)
* Your care is more individualized to your needs
* You have actively decreased your sexual dysfunction symptoms by acting on them
* You have a more collaborative relationship with your healthcare team
* You have open, warm, and honest conversations with your intimate partner
* You feel better about yourself through your self-advocacy accomplishments

## Summarizing the steps to effective self-advocacy

Keep a log or a journal of your symptoms.

Have collaborative conversations with your healthcare team.

Educate yourself with well-vetted sources.

Clearly state your needs and decline what you don’t want.

Write your questions for your doctor down in your journal.

Use your journal to make your conversations easier.

Avoid adversarial conversations.

Leverage Member Services of your healthcare plan to ensure you understand what is covered and confirm you are using in-network providers.

Be open, respectful, warm, and honest with your intimate partner; tell them what you need.

Listen to your partner, and avoid going on the defensive.

Love yourself.

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