



FOR PARTNERS OF THOSE AFFECTED BY CANCER

This handout is offered as a communication aid for patients and their providers. It is not a substitute for professional examination, diagnosis, or treatment.

The emotional stress of a cancer diagnosis affects the patient AND those who love and care for them. The cancer experience, from diagnosis through treatment and in survivorship, can cause a tremendous strain on an intimate relationship. It can create distance between partners, cause serious disruptions to open communication, and leave each party feeling isolated and alone.

As the patient's spouse or partner, you also experience 'side effects' from a cancer diagnosis that impact your quality of life. The changes cancer creates can impact you in several different ways: psychological, emotional, social, relational, and spiritual. And, like the patient, your 'side effects' range from mild and short-term to severe and long-lasting.

Even if your partner doesn't lose a limb or body part that directly impacts sexual function, they may still feel like damaged goods. Cancer can significantly affect their self-esteem, body image, and how attractive they feel. Your partner may not recognize the person staring back at them in the mirror. Or, they may feel betrayed by their body and undesirable.

You may sense these changes. How close and secure you feel in your relationship is fluid. Shifts in either partner's feelings, emotions, and behaviors will alter the dynamics of the relationship. Though you probably don't feel the exact same emotions as your partner, you probably do have your own fears, anxiety, dread, and loss. You won't have a clear understanding yet of how these feelings may affect your intimate relationship in the long term.

A cancer diagnosis or its treatment can temporarily suspend your sex life. Open communication and re-writing your sexual scripts will help you find intimacy again.

Some Suggestions

- Check in with each other often. Be curious about how your experience is impacting each of you and your relationship as a couple. If you have found it difficult to talk through other issues in your relationship, you may find it even more difficult to talk/work through problems related to intimacy. Consider couples counseling to work through these issues.
- Find time outside the bedroom for conversation.

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- Make time for each other, and when discussing topics sensitive to one of you, consider limiting conversations to 30 minutes at a time or if things get tense. If one party isn't used to discussing their feelings, a short conversation won't be too overwhelming.
- Be aware that you both may have many difficult feelings to sort out in your mind, anxiety about openly discussing those feelings, and fears about the future.
- Avoid arguments and blame. Use active listening skills:
 - Each person takes 3-5 uninterrupted minutes to share their thoughts, feelings, and fears regarding cancer and your intimate relationship.
 - After listening, the partner states their understanding of what they heard, clarifying until agreement on what was said occurs.
 - As before, the listener then states their understanding of what they heard, clarifying until agreement on what was said occurs.
 - Maintain warmth and respect through this exchange.
- Don't expect all problems to get solved in one or two conversations. Patience with each other will prove valuable.
- Don't be too broad, as in, *'Honey, I want to talk about our sex life.'* Instead, consider, *'I would like to talk about the pain I feel when we have intercourse.'* To avoid misunderstandings, be specific. *'I have no desire for sex'* may be misinterpreted as, *'she isn't attracted to me anymore'* or *'she has no desire for sex with me.'*
- If there is a specific problem, name it; being vague may lead to misinterpretation.
- Consider writing down your thoughts before talking to help you better articulate your meaning and feelings.

Rewrite Your Sexual Scripts to Find Intimacy Again

- Sexual Scripts are the very personal ways we express intimacy and love with each other. They are called 'scripts' because there is a very definite pattern, a beginning, middle, and end. In the book *Intimacy After Cancer*, by Dr. Sally Kidd and Dana Rowett, sexual scripts are described as, 'the how, what, when, where, and why of your intimate and sexual relationship.' For example, how do you transition from a nonsexual situation to a sexual one? Do you have a set pattern, such as always making love on a Saturday night? What usually occurs before you become intimate?
- Your unique sexual script is how you enjoy your intimate relationship. After cancer, your script may have to change. Consider rewriting your sexual scripts to help find intimacy again. What felt good before may now be uncomfortable or even painful. And, spontaneity may not be possible. The first step to rewriting your sexual script is considering the sexual scripts you used before cancer. Then, think through how those scripts may need to change in the future.
- Consider trying Sensate Focus, progressive intimate touch exercises that help couples rediscover intimacy with decreased anxiety. See After Cancer's handout, *Sensate Focus: Touching Exercise to Rediscover Intimacy*.

Additional Articles for Spouses and Partners

When Your Spouse Has Cancer

<https://med.stanford.edu/survivingcancer/cancer-and-stress/when-your-spouse-has-cancer.html>

Caregiver Support Group — Spouses/Partners

https://www.cancercare.org/support_groups/77-caregiver_support_group_spouses_partners

How to Support a Spouse or Partner During Cancer Treatment by “Holding Space”

<https://www.cancer.net/blog/2021-04/how-support-spouse-or-partner-during-cancer-treatment-%E2%80%9Cholding-space%E2%80%9D>

Quality of Life in Partners of Patients with Cancer

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18459067/>

Cancer and Relationship Dissolution: Perspective of Partners of Cancer Patients

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.624902/full>

The Effect on Partners

<https://www.cancercouncil.com.au/cancer-information/advanced-cancer/living-with-advanced-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/partners/>
