This Body is Mine: Reclaiming Body Image & Intimacy

• Moving Beyond Cancer to Wellness – June 3, 2023

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Choose a Superhero

• What is their name?
• What is their Superpower?
• What is their “fatal flaw”? 
• Do you admire them?
• Would you want to live with them?
Choose a real-life hero for you

- What is their name?
- What makes them a hero to you?
- What is a physical “flaw” or challenge?
- What is a character “flaw”?
- Do you admire them?
- Would you want to live with them?
Choose a current support in your life

• What is their name?
• How do they support you?
• What is their supportive Superpower?
• Do they have physical or character “flaws”? 
• Do you like them anyway?
What is Body Image?

- A person’s picture or mental image of themselves.
  - Oxford dictionary

- Including physical characteristics (body perception) and one’s attitude toward those characteristics (body concept).
  - American Psychological Association

- A combination of thoughts and feelings about your body.
  - National Eating Disorders Collaboration (NEDC.com)
What is Self-Esteem?

- Confidence in one’s own worth or abilities.
  - Oxford Dictionary
- How you value and respect yourself as a person.
  - heretohelp.bc.ca
Why are body image and self-esteem important?

- **Any change** can be hard to accept and can affect your body image and self-esteem
- Even if you don’t have any physical changes that can be seen, you still might feel that others “see you differently” than they did before.
- You might think that others don’t understand you or can’t relate to you now.

- Altered body image can lead to:
  - decreased self-care & unhealthy lifestyle choices
  - relationship challenges – partners, family, friends, healthcare team, public...
  - Loss of intimacy, isolation

- Low self-esteem can lead to:
  - anxiety, stress, fear, worry, depression, isolation, anger
  - a sense of futility, giving up
How Cancer Messes With Body Image and Self-esteem

• Physical Changes
  • More obvious
    • Hair loss
    • Weight gain or loss
    • Muscle tone and fitness
    • Loss or change of a body part
    • Scars, rashes, skin color or tone
    • Movement – ability, assistance
  • Less obvious
    • Ostomy
    • Prosthesis
    • Devices
    • Fertility

• Emotional Changes
  • Anxiety, worry, guilt
  • Sadness, loss, grief
  • Frustration, ‘I’m not in control’
    • Fatigue, abilities, appointments
  • Fear of the unknowns
  • Role changes – how we see ourselves as important or worthy
    • ‘I don’t know who I am now’
    • Work, school, life goals
    • Usual role at home or in public
    • Activities, hobbies
    • Relationship changes
What is Intimacy?

• Close familiarity or friendship
  • Oxford Dictionary

• Closeness, connected, cozy
• Supportive, equal footing, trust

Types:
• Emotional – transparent, available
• Physical – safe touch, respect
• Mental – mutual respect, curiosity
• Spiritual – shared values or beliefs
  • PsycCentral.com
Intimacy & Sexuality After Cancer

- Worries about attractiveness
- Changes in desire to be touched
- Changes in the sensation of touch
- Changes in energy level and sex drive
- Hormone changes
- Worries about sexual function
- Worries about fertility
When to seek help...

• You don’t want to leave your house because you don’t want people to see you.
• You don’t want to date or meet new people.
• You avoid touching, being affectionate or having sex with your partner.
• You’re afraid to undress in front of your partner.
• You won’t let your partner see your scars.
• You’re embarrassed because you lost or gained weight.
• You feel ashamed for having cancer.
• You’re unable to accept yourself for who you are now.
Negative feelings are normal: Cordelia Galgut, PhD


- People have told me that hearing that negative feelings are normal has freed them up to be less guilt-ridden.

- Instead of saying, “I’m really struggling, but I shouldn’t be,” now I more easily let myself off the hook and say, “I’m suffering enough, and I don’t have to feel guilty for doing so or put pressure on myself to feel positive when I don’t.”

- And though I am quite against the instruction I have often been given to “move on” and “get over” cancer, it is certainly the case that in my own life, once I have been able to give myself permission to feel less guilty and less positive, I have more easily experienced a kind of release.

- Allow yourself to feel angry
  - Recognize and acknowledge all the feelings
  - Ask for help if anger is all you feel all the time

- Adopt a mantra
  - What can you say to yourself that acknowledges your feelings and helps you move on with your day?

- Tell people how their words (or actions) make you feel
  - Anticipate the questions and comments
  - Practice what to say that will have the outcome you want or hope to have happen
  - Write it down, then decide what to do with it...

- Take the pressure to feel positive and grateful off yourself
  - Gratitude and positivity aren’t the enemy, it is the pressure and expectation that create resentment
Tina Turner quote:

At every moment, we always have a choice, even if it feels as if we don’t. Sometimes that choice may simply be to think a more positive thought.
Taking control of your body image after cancer
https://www.cancercenter.com/community/blog/2021/04/cancer-self-image

• Be aware of self-talk
  • Would I say that to a friend?
  • Affirmations, mantras, memes
  • Post-It’s, phone reminders, vision boards

• Understand your communication needs
  • Take notice of what doesn’t ‘sit well’
  • Ask clearly for what you need (or don’t!)
    • Pause before hitting ‘send’
    • Don’t drink and text
    • It’s OK to say what you mean

• Take good care of your body
  • Movement
  • Nutrition, hydration
  • Rest
  • Follow-up appointments
  • Routine health care

• Seek support from others
  • Friends, partner, neighbors, classes
  • Supportive group/social activities
  • Take notice of isolation
  • Healthcare providers, mental health counselors or groups
What to try: Tips for Positive Change

• Try positive new *sensory* experiences
  • *Eyes* – coloring, painting, art, people watching, being in nature
  • *Ears* – music, mindfulness, audio books
  • *Nose* – aroma therapy, gardening, sitting in nature with closed eyes
  • *Taste* – teas, cooking, smoothies, cuisines
  • *Whole body* – bath, massage, movement

• Intimacy – feeling socially connected
  • Connect with yourself
  • Reach out to a friend
  • Safe connections on-line
  • Work on *clear* communication

• Intimacy – feeling sexually connected
  • self-exploration of what feels safe, positive, and joyful
  • Partner time: use *clear* communication, rebuild trust, go slow
  • *Let each time be its own time*

Talk to your healthcare team.
Support and resources are available for physical and emotional concerns!
Think about yourself...

• What is your name?
• What is one “Superpower” you have?
• What is one flaw?
• What are two positives about you in this moment?
• Write one positive affirmation or reminder
You belong. Everywhere.
Yes, you – with all your history, anxiety, pain.
Yes, everywhere – in every culture, community, circumstance.
You belong in this body.
You belong in this very moment.
You belong in this breath...
and this one.
You have always belonged.
Thank you for coming today!
Leslie Heron

A flower does not have to do anything to be of service. It only has to be a flower. That is enough. A human being, a true human being, is enough to make the whole world rejoice.

Thich Nhat Hanh
Resources

• Books
  • Al Achkar, M - Being Authentic, A Memoir & Roads to Meaning and Resilience with Cancer: Forty stories of coping, finding meaning and building resilience while living with incurable lung cancer.
  • Barrett, C - Good Grief: Strategies for building resilience and supporting transformation.
  • Brach, T - Radical Compassion: Learning to love yourself and your world with the practice of RAIN.
  • Hanh, T – The Art of Communicating
  • Huber, C – Making a Change for Good: A guide to compassionate self-discipline
  • Katz, A - Man, Cancer, Sex & Woman, Cancer, Sex.
  • Notte, J - The Monster Under the Bed: Sex, depression, and the conversations we aren’t having.

• On-Line (in addition to the ones noted on the slides)
  • American Cancer Society: https://www.cancer.org/
  • American Society of Clinical Oncology: https://www.cancer.net/
  • Cancercare: https://www.cancercare.org/
  • Cancer Support Community: https://www.cancersupportcommunity.org/
  • Healing Circles Global: https://healingcirclesglobal.org/
  • National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship: https://canceradvocacy.org/
  • National Institute of Health/National Cancer Institute: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/self-image
  • Psychology Today “Find a Therapist” tool: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us