

Can We Talk? Communication & Tools for Sexual Health Resources and Things to Consider

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Intimacy and sexuality are impacted for most individuals and couples with health conditions. I hope this list is only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ for resources you consider.

Free Booklets: The American Cancer Society offers several resources on sexuality, intimacy, fertility, body image, and more. (www.cancer.org)

Books: See robust (!) book list on the last page.

Communication: Journals, sticky notes, cards let you write your feelings, a love note, or a wish list. Card decks and games (try: www.bestproductsreviews.com/intimacy-card-game) can be a way to “draw a card” and start a conversation. Apps on communication can be helpful, too (consider: www.Gottman.com).

Body image, reconnecting with your body (or your partners’ body): Walking; yoga; swimming; movement to music; taking an exercise class; physical therapy; pelvic floor physical therapy; weightlifting; massage; positive self-talk; and more.

Touch does not have to be sexual or with a partner to be meaningful: Massage oil, body lotions, bath brushes, Reflexology charts/socks, massage tools and vibrators can help give permission for touch. You might start with touching yourself, so you know what works for you (called “*sensate focus*”). Journaling and counseling are other ways to ‘get in touch’ with yourself and with a partner.

Libido - How to get back to that loving feeling? Talking about it, think about it, talk about it some more... also romantic books and movies, happy memory sharing, and doing fun activities away from the bedroom can spark desire.

Mood: Candles, relaxation, music, put together a travel kit for a romantic getaway (or night at home). Set clear expectations and start slowly to avoid fear, shame, or conflict.

Fear of pain, being demanding, reconnection, not knowing how to talk about intimacy (with partners or medical providers), of being embarrassed, of what is normal, of dating, of telling a partner about your cancer history or body changes – all of those things are normal. Try: Books, talking (friends, providers, partner), counseling (individual, couple, clergy), journaling. Keeping it to yourself is rarely the answer to this concern.

Incontinence – general and/or with orgasm: Kegel exercises; pelvic floor physical therapy; core strengthening exercises such as physical therapy, yoga, Pilates, dance. Surgery may be an option for some causes for loss of bowel or bladder control.

Spasm/pain – Breathing, going slow, lubes, acupuncture, pelvic rehab/PT, surgery. Numbing is not usually the correct answer, but spot-treating with lidocaine-containing lube may be helpful in some cases. Counseling can help, too.

Vaginal dryness and/or **pelvic tissue** atrophy (loss of stretch) –

- Vaginal moisturizers – apply by hand, on dilator/vibrator, or Lube Tubes
- Internal and external symptoms helped by moisturizing *consistently*
- **Dilators & vibrators** – Inspire is the dilator set I demo; Lelo is the higher end and Fun Factory is the less expensive brand of vibrators I show. There are many, *many* brands and types to choose from! (See ‘Stores’ below.)
- Hypersensitivity: lidocaine, numbing lotions, cannabis creams – use very cautiously, just in specific spots that are problematic.
- Hormone therapy - can help with *consistent* use, may be used with moisturizers. These can’t be used by everyone or with some cancer types, needs an Rx.
- Procedures – laser treatment to stimulate the production of collagen – these can be quite expensive. Mixed reports on effectiveness, not many studies have included cancer survivors specifically.
- Addyi (flibanserin) is a non-hormonal, multifunctional serotonin agonist antagonist (MSAA). Not for most women with health conditions or those on medications due to the many potential side effects.

Erection Concerns

- Can be temporary, intermittent, partial or total
- If any erections happen, then (Rx) medications like Viagra, Cialis, etc. may help improve quality and duration of erections. Pills or injections are available.
- Penile implants are a safe and effective surgical option.
- Using other body parts (mouth, fingers) or toys (dildos, vibrators) can also be satisfying to you and your partner.
- Orgasm is possible without an erection, experiment for what works for you.

Lubrication Products

- Water based: OK for anyone, anytime. Babelube, Sliquid (standard or ‘Sassy’) are the ones I usually demo because they are reliable and not hard to find. Many other brands available and are fine to use. Avoid the ones with alcohol or preservatives – look at ingredient list before you buy.
- Moisturizers: Sliquid ‘Satin’ and Ah! Yes are reliable products. Other brands also available, again, look at ingredients before you buy.
- Oil based: Not for use with condoms or dental dams. Oils are more likely to have allergic reactions – ask/know what oils are used in the product.
- Silicone: Not for use with silicone toys/tools. Very slippery, which can be a pro or con for different people.
- Additives: Flavors, warming, cannabis, etc. – use with caution, and not as the ‘first’ product you try. Hyaluronic acid is not a long-term solution, expensive.

Hormones

- Hormone levels may be altered due to breast, ovarian, prostate, brain and other treatments affecting hormones, such as radiation or transplant.
- Hormone levels can be tested and treated, but often they are not the sole reason or answer to sexual concerns.
- Estrogen: Some forms may be contraindicated with ER+ breast and/or pelvic cancers. Estrogen may be in different forms, pill, vaginal (cream or gel), topical patch, and may be “compounded” (made into a special cream mixture) by a compounding pharmacy.
- Testosterone: Not “the answer” for libido/drive. May be contraindicated for some cancers. Available as injection, pill, topical patch, topical cream, or compounded cream.

Counseling

- Psychology Today Find a Counselor:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>
- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors & Therapists:
<https://www.aasect.org/referral-directory>

Stores to safely and reliably purchase items mentioned in class or this list:

- Shine – SCCA - 206-606-7560:
<https://www.seattlecca.org/shine>
- She Bop – Portland, OR - 503-473-8018:
<https://www.sheboptheshop.com/>
- Babeland – 1-888-289-8423:
<https://www.babeland.com/>

Talk with your healthcare provider – Let them know this is happening, and that you think it is important enough to talk about. They may know how to get you help or may have other ideas to add to this list. You can talk to your oncologist, primary care provider, gynecologist, urologist, nurse, physical therapist, counselor, social worker, your partner, or a friend. Some people find support in their religious community or through a cancer support group.

This general resource list was created as a place for you to begin your own research. Not everything listed here is appropriate for every person, please talk to your healthcare team if you have questions.

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Intimacy & Cancer Book Suggestions

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- Al Achkar, Morhaf. Roads to Meaning and Resilience with Cancer.
- Albaugh, Jeffrey. Reclaiming Sex & Intimacy After Prostate Cancer: A Guide for Men and Their Partners.
- Blakeway, Jill. Sex Again: Recharging your Libido
- Brown, Richard and Garbarg, Patricia. The Healing Power of the Breath: Simple Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance Your Emotions.
- Corwin, Glenda. Sexual Intimacy for Women: A Guide for Same-Sex Couples.
- Guntapalli, Saketh and Karinch, Maryann. Sex and Cancer: Intimacy, Romance and Love After Diagnosis and Treatment.
- Gottman, John and Schwartz-Gottman, Julie. The Love Prescription: 7 Days to More Intimacy, Connection, and Joy, and others www.gottman.com
- Haines, Staci. Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma.
- Holtby, Lisa. Healing Yoga for People Living with Cancer.
- Johnson, Sue. Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love.
- Katz, Anne. Cancer, Sex, and Intimacy: A Couple's Guide; Man Cancer Sex; Woman Cancer Sex; This Should Not Be Happening: Young Adults with Cancer; Breaking the Silence on Cancer and Sexuality: A Handbook for Healthcare Providers, and others www.drannekatz.com/books
- Kollak, Ingrid and Utz-Billing, Isabell. Yoga and Breast Cancer: A Journey to Health and Healing.
- Krasnow, Iris. Sex After: Women Share How Intimacy Changes as Life Change
- Kydd, Sally & Rowett, Dana. Intimacy After Cancer: A Woman's Guide
- Laken, Keith & Virginia. Hope for Couples Facing Loss of Sexual Intimacy
- Maisano, Gina. Intimacy After Breast Cancer: A Practical Guide to Dealing with Your Body, Relationships & Sex.
- Munoz, Alicia. A Year of Us: One Question a Day to Spark Fun & Meaningful Conversations.
- Nagoski, Emily. Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life; The Come As You Are Workbook; and Come Together: The Science (and Art!) of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections.
- Notte, JoEllen. The Monster under the bed: Sex, Depression and the Conversations We Aren't Having.
- Pennebaker, James and Evans, John. Expressive Writing: Words that Heal.
- Rosenthal, Kairol. Everything Changes: The Insider's Guide to Cancer in Your 20's and 30's.
- Schwartz, Anna. Cancer Fitness: Exercise Programs for Patients and Survivors.
- Shapiro, Dan. And In Health: A Guide for Couples Facing Cancer Together.
- Silk, Danny. Keep Your Love On: Connection, Communication, and Boundaries

