Sexuality and Intimacy During and After Cancer

DR. STEPHANIE BUEHLER
800-769-0342
First Cancer, then Sex

- Reaction to bad news (Kubler-Ross)
  - Denial/shock, anger, bargaining, depression, resolution/acceptance
- Demands of treatment
- Coping with change
  - Image of oneself as a healthy person
  - Seeing the body as vulnerable
  - Facing one’s mortality
- Reclaiming your sex life may be a big part of your recovery
Why Talk about Sex and Cancer?

– More people are surviving cancer
– Sexual health is important to wellbeing
– Any kind of cancer can affect sexuality and relationships
You after Cancer

- Accepting change
  - Hormones
  - Bodily function
  - Scarring, hair loss, disfigurement
- Accepting the body’s timeline
  - Your body, heart, and mind may heal at different rates
  - Be patient with yourself
Talking about Sex and Cancer...

- Can improve psychological adjustment to having had cancer
- Strengthen the primary relationship and therefore social support
- Improve the quality of life overall
What Kinds of Cancer Causes Problems?

– Usually, we think of cancers that have a direct effect on reproductive organs
  – Breast and gynecological cancers for women
  – Prostate cancer for men
– But any kind of cancer can cause problems
Relationship Changes

- Role reversal
  - Provider; planner; caregiver; housekeeper; chef; primary parent
- “Medicalization” of relationship and the home
- Emotional enmeshment or distance
- Some couples feel strengthened by the experience
- Sadly, some find cancer strains their relationship
  - Seek help if you are struggling
Sexual Problems Caused by Cancer
Women may experience...

- Change in sex drive
- Reduced vaginal lubrication
- Early menopause
- Painful intercourse (dyspareunia)
- Change in body image
- Dissatisfaction with intimate relationship
Men may experience...

- Change in ejaculation
- Erectile problems (ED)
- Change in orgasm
- Urinary incontinence
- Image of oneself as a man
- Low self worth
- Change in sexual confidence
What Helps?

1. Open communication about sex
2. Seeing the value of sex and intimacy
3. View of sex as more than penis-vagina intercourse

Perz, Ussher, & Gilbert (2013). *BMC Cancer.*
Open Communication

– With oneself
  – Don’t deny that there is a problem
  – Continue to see yourself as a sexual being

– With one’s partner
  – Identify what problems you are having
  – Keep trying different “scripts” to find one that works

– With the medical providers
  – Don’t be embarrassed; sexual problems are common
  – Ask for suggestions
  – A referral to a sex therapist does not mean you are ”crazy”
Acknowledge the Value of Sex

- Vitality
- Feeling like a woman or a man
- Communicating feelings that are hard to put in words
- Satisfying the need for touch
Redefining “Sex”

– “Sex,” or intercourse..
  – ...Requires energy, stamina, and a working reproductive system
– Non-intercourse forms of pleasure or “outercourse”...
  – ...Requires less energy and stamina
– Outercourse can be more intimate, not less
Specific Suggestions

Fall 1,000 times, get up 1,001.
Sex Drive

- Acceptance that drive may never return to pre-cancer levels
- Identify different reasons to have sex
  - Closeness, intimacy, feeling normal, being touched, giving and receiving love
- Plan for sex
  - Couples that schedule sex have sex more frequently
  - Being intentional need not diminish the experience
Lube!

- Always use lubricant
  - Silicon-based: Uber Lube, Astroglide Premium Lubricant (do not use on toys)
  - Water-based: Slippery Stuff, Astroglide (may need to reapply)
- Oils may be hard for the body to clear
- Ask your physician about…
  - Moisturizers, e.g., Replens
  - Topical estrogen cream or ring (e.g., Est-ring)
  - Vaginal laser treatment
Painful Intercourse

- Lubrication
- Consult with physician
  - Estrogen, both topical and systemic
  - Referral to pelvic floor physical therapist
- Try “digital dilation” and small toys or dilators first
- Stop having intercourse until problem is resolved
  - ”Fear-avoidance” cycle
Arousal

- Relax before sexual activity with a nap, bath, massage, listen to music, etc.
- Minimize distraction; music can be helpful
- Increase time for foreplay
- Consider adding sexual aids especially vibrators
- Accept that your body has changed; what used to work may work no longer
ED (Erectile Dysfunction)

- Allow yourself time to heal
- Banish negative thoughts like, “I am not a man unless I can get a natural erection,” and “It is embarrassing not to have a natural erection.”
- Men can have orgasms without erections after prostate cancer
- It isn’t critical to have a firm erection to have sexual enjoyment
Using Medications

– Generally accepted that injection is the best course of treatment after prostate cancer because it works
– Oral medications should be taken therapeutically as prescribed by your physician
– Talk to partner openly about how to incorporate the use of medications into your sex life
Improving Effect of Meds

- Be relaxed in your approach to having sex
- Be kind to yourself and have realistic expectations
- Get good at other types of sex
  - “She Comes First” by Ian Kerner
- Be persistent
- Allow time for body to heal
  - This may not be the time for “mind over body”
“Outercourse”

- Try different kinds of kissing
- Discover erogenous zones
- Use fingers for stimulation
- Rubbing bodies and genitals
- Oral sex
- Try toys
- Try different lubricants
- Incorporate pleasant scents, lighting
How to Talk about Sex

- Don’t give feedback about sex immediately after
- Do sit some place neutral to talk, e.g., the sofa
- Talk about what feels good and is working first
- Then give a short, assertive statement about what you need
- Repeat what feels good
- Ask partner for any feedback as well
What About Sex Therapy?

- What is a sex therapist?
  - Licensed mental health professional
  - Ideally has additional training and AASECT certification
- What happens in sex therapy?
  - Sex therapy is “talk therapy” with no touching or disrobing
  - Identify the problem or problems
  - Provide information, suggestions, activities, reading
  - Intensive therapy for longstanding or difficult problems
When to Consult a Sex Therapist

– One or both of you are avoiding the topic of sex
– You have been fighting about sex
– You have tried several things to make sex better but nothing seems to be working
– When talking about sex is very embarrassing or difficult
– When you are not having sex because you are not getting along
– When you have questions about sex and don’t know where to turn
Questions?

Dr. Stephanie Buehler
Licensed Psychologist / AASECT Sex Therapist
Author, What Every Mental Health Professional Needs to Know about Sex

Dr.StephanieBuehler@gmail.com
800-769-0342