

Pain and Sexuality

There are many things that can interfere with having a good sex life. When living with chronic pain it will be important for you to separate out what sexual problems are related to pain and what are related to long-standing self-esteem and relationship difficulties. This handout provides information about how to start to regain a healthy sex life.

Above all, it is important thing to have confidence in yourself. You can gain confidence by doing everything possible to build up a good body image and respect for yourself.

To better understand your sex life, it is often best to know your feelings about sex and what may prevent you from having a healthy sex life. Think about the following, you may:

- compare your sexual performance to before your pain problem
 - not go out as much and meet people
 - have mood swings
 - have not dealt with your partner's real and perceived expectations
 - have early negative experiences – mistrust, guilt – sex is not seen as healthy, normal and pleasurable
 - have a history of abuse, mistrust, guilt
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Accept that you are a sexual being

The first step in restoring your sex life is to realize that we are all sexual people, and that this affects us in different ways. If you are in a relationship, single or celibate it is important to recognize your own sexuality.

Those with sexual partners realize that having a healthy relationship day-to-day, and having a healthy sexual relationship is part of feeling satisfied about your life.

Living with chronic pain or illness, your self-image can be very low. It is important to see yourself as an “attractive person”, or being interesting to other people, or to simply like yourself when you look in the mirror. To be comfortable with your body, a sense of health and integrity can be built by healthy habits and exercise.

Set non-demanding expectations

The next step is to set non-demanding expectations. Change the focus from having to have orgasms or to have sex. Perhaps intimacy is a place to begin. You want to develop confidence and good bodily feelings.

This can be done by

- concentrating on making a more conducive atmosphere
- changing the pattern of activities that leads to sexual activity
- using sex toys and reading materials if this is acceptable to both
- learning to enjoy each other and your own body. Spend more time caressing and touching. You don't have to have intercourse. Share and accept what it means to be a good lover with each other.
- understanding that it is healthy that some people enjoy sex more often than others.

Key points and what may help your sex life

Key point: Self image

Think of 2 to 3 activities you do everyday at home (feed pet, brush teeth, coffee) and LINK this activity with an exercise you are learning.

Sexuality is very much tied up with your self-image — how well you think of yourself and how you are functioning. Living with chronic pain or illness along with repeated medical tests, exams and invasions of your own private body space can harm your sense of privacy and integrity.

What may help you

Efforts have to be made to improve your self-image. If you do not like yourself, how can you perceive yourself as lovable and likable. You want to feel attractive. Paying attention to how you dress and groom yourself may help you feel more attractive. Your own sense of being can be improved by healthy habits and daily exercise.

Key point: Fear of pain

There is fear of pain and harming yourself during sexual activity. Performance anxiety due to not being able to count on your body. This fear may be a problem for you, as well as your partner. Because pain is distracting, it may interfere with sex. You may worry that there is something wrong with you and become very performance oriented. You focus and worry just on having a climax and not enjoying your body and your partner's body.

What may help you

To deal with the fear of pain, problems related to your posture can be corrected with changing positions. For example, if you have back or neck pain and you are on top, you may find that arching the neck or the back may lead to pain a few hours later. Try other positions:

- lying on the side with one thigh flexed forward, and the other partner doing the same so that a side-to-side position will allow rounding the back.

- lying on your back with a couple of pillows under the shoulder and neck, and perhaps even a pillow under one knee, lying partially to the side may take more pressure off the back.

The key here is to experiment:

- Find a position that is comfortable for you both and see how it works.
- Try deep breathing or other relaxation techniques beforehand.
- If you have joint stiffness, try taking a hot bath/shower or do a few range exercises or partner gentle yoga positions before beginning.
- Have various size pillows around to help with obtaining different positions.
- Remember that keeping knees bent, automatically flattens low back and takes some of the stress off the lower spine, and use this information when experimenting with different positions.
- Try making love (having sex) at different times of the day.
- It is not always easy to avoid extension of the back and neck especially during climax. Try to keep the chin tucked in closely to the chest.

Note: Be mindful of problems related to gynecological surgery and pain in the genital area. Sometimes this sort of pain can be relieved by direct pain relieving techniques, such as electrical nerve stimulation.

Key point: Fear of failure

Fear of failure or performance. Change the focus from “being successful at sex” and instead, concentrating on enjoying being a lover and being loved.

What may help you

- It is helpful to use relaxation and breathing techniques.
- Gradually introducing sexual play, caressing and loving touches without feeling “performance oriented”.
- Communicating clearly with each other.

Key point: Medications

Many medications given for pain and sleep, as well as alcohol, interfere quite a bit with sexual performance. When your partner tries to help by “trying harder” to bring on a climax or when there is a great deal of attention and concern shown by your partner, your self-image may take a beating.

What may help you

- Use of lubricant gels.
- Be aware that alcohol can interfere with performance.
- Be aware of medication side effects that can change your mood or sex drive. Share this information with your partner.

Key point: Guilty

You may feel guilty about having to say “no” to your partner, or feel obligated to satisfy your partner. While embarrassing and involves feelings of loss of confidence, you may find it difficult to talk about your sexual feelings and worries. You may avoid sex altogether, by staying up late, sleeping at odd hours or simply being absent.

Because of many frustrating experiences, you may end up so frustrated that you think “it’s no use, I have tried everything already!”

What may help you

- Talk about it.
- Work on your relationship: relationship problems do not stop outside of the bedroom.