

Depression

It is estimated that approximately 15% to 25 % of people dealing with cancer will also experience depression. Carers, relatives and friends may also suffer from depression. For anyone who thinks they maybe experiencing depression it is important to inform a health professional. There are a range of effective treatments.

Where to Go For Help

If you have any concerns then please discuss them with your doctor or other health professionals.

Additional support :

- ❖ **Impotence Australia:** (counselling for sexual and relationship issues): 1800 800 614
www.impotenceaustralia.com.au
- ❖ **Cancer Council:** 1800 650 960
www.cancerCouncil.com.au
- ❖ **Beyond Blue:** (the national depression initiative)
www.beyondblue.org.au
- ❖ **Andrology Australia:** (information about male sexual conditions) www.andrologyaustralia.org

Authors

The content of this document has been compiled by the following experts using available medical evidence and should be used as guide only. Treatment advice specific to your situation should be sought from your doctor.

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Cancer Patients' Partners & Sexuality

Partners Worries

When your partner is diagnosed with cancer it can be a frightening and lonely time for you both. The spotlight will be on the person with cancer and many partners find it hard to express their own concerns and fears.

Some Common Questions asked by Partners:

❖ *Will I hurt her/him if we have sex?*

Remember sex is not just about intercourse. This is a time to experiment and be creative with your lovemaking. Take time and talk about what feels good and safe. A woman who has lost a breast or a man who cannot achieve an erection post surgery may still need to be caressed and held and can give and receive sexual pleasure in other ways.

❖ *Will I be affected by my partner's radiation/chemotherapy treatment?*

This depends on the type of treatment and you need to talk to your doctor. Your partner will not be radioactive when he/she gets home after radiotherapy but there is a possibility you could be affected for a short time after they have had chemotherapy. Your doctor may suggest using a condom and latex gloves for digital penetration, to protect you from the drugs in his/her body fluids during the 48 hours following chemotherapy.

❖ *Is the cancer contagious?*

You CANNOT catch cancer through kissing, intercourse or oral sex.

❖ *What about pregnancy?*

Birth control is important as cancer treatments can harm a baby. If you are thinking of getting pregnant or there's a possibility you may want to in the future you need to talk to your doctor. Some cancer treatments will affect fertility and you need to discuss this before treatment begins.

❖ *When will I be able to talk about my needs for a change?*

This can be a really stressful time for you too and it's vital you have support at all stages. Partners often find it hard to express their grief/depression/fears as they feel of less importance than those of the cancer patient. Friends and support groups are important.

❖ *I am worried I will not find her/him attractive and I will no longer want to have sex?*

This is a very common concern. Just as your partner may have to come to terms with changes in their bodies you need time to adjust too. The unknown is always scary but you will adjust. After diagnosis and during treatment your partner may go off sex and you may choose to hold back for this period. However, once your partner has recovered and keen to be intimate again you may have temporary lib problems because you no longer feel desired! This is a time of fluctuating emotions and insecurities and you will both need encouragement and reassurance that you are still attractive to one another. Try to be patient and give yourself time to recover and focus on all the additional things you find appealing about each other such as humor, intelligence etc.

❖ *It's hard to switch from caretaker role to lover.*

Again give yourself time to adapt; it won't happen overnight and you may have to juggle roles for a while. As your partner's needs change and he/she becomes more sexually confident you will be able to re-focus on your role as lover rather than caretaker.

❖ *I feel like I am on a roller coaster.*

After the drama of diagnosis and treatment you may find yourself flooded with emotion when things calm down and life returns to normal. You may have taken time off work and now have to return to your life pre-cancer and begin to address your own needs and emotions. Typically many partners continue to take the caretaker role when it is actually a perfect time to address their own needs and let the dust settle. If you haven't sought help now may be the time.

How You Can Help the Recovery Process

- ❖ Let your partner know you still find them attractive even though he/she may have changed physically.
- ❖ Allow your partner to go at his/her own pace and be patient. If your partner is recovering from breast cancer she may need dim lights and clothing to hide her scar. It may take time for her to feel sexual again but looking at and perhaps touching her scar will help her get used to her altered body. Likewise if your partner is dealing with the effects of prostate cancer treatment, such as erectile dysfunction, he will need your patience and understanding.
- ❖ Explore together what makes your partner feel good and try different ways of showing your love.
- ❖ Be patient with your partner as their emotions flare and fluctuate and keep reminding yourself of the positive attributes, which attracted you in the first place.

Most people see their partners as being made up of many parts and will adapt to the changes cancer may bring. Good communication is more important than ever. It will help to talk with your partner as well as to other cancer survivors and professionals such as doctors, sex therapists and counsellors.

Remember you are dealing with a crisis. The cancer will expose any cracks in the relationship and, if there were problems before the cancer they are not going to go away. However many people discover new depths to themselves and their partners and many forge deeper bonds of intimacy.

Your partner's chances of recovery are greatly enhanced if everyone works together and your encouragement and support will be invaluable. Become part of the team and play an active role in the treatment and recovery process.