

Between the Sheets...

December 2019

This column provides the platform for experts in the field to help men and women by providing answers to questions about sexual health and intimacy challenges that can result from prostate cancer treatment.

This column was compiled with the help of Dr. Anne Katz, Certified Sexuality Counselor and Clinical Nurse Specialist at CancerCare Manitoba. She has educated thousands of healthcare providers and cancer survivors about cancer, sexuality and survivorship. She is the editor of the Oncology Nursing Forum, an avid blogger for ASCO Connections, and the author of 13 books on the topics of illness, sexuality and cancer survivorship. (www.drannekatz.com)

QUESTION FROM PROSTATE CANCER SURVIVOR:

My husband of 32 years has been a great partner and father to our four kids. He has always been a good provider and I love him very much. We married a little late (I was 30 and he was 35) and while we have had our financial challenges over the years, we managed to get through them all. We are now comfortable in retirement and I thought these were going to be the golden years everyone talks about.

A year ago he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He dealt with it as he has dealt with every other challenge. He decided to have surgery and got that done about a month after he heard the news. Everything seemed to go well. He didn't want to talk about it much and that didn't bother me because that's how he deals with everything. He's a man of action as they say. He didn't want me to go with him to any appointments and so most of the information I found was on the internet. But what I have read doesn't talk about what is happening now. He has not touched me since his surgery. By that I mean that he has not given me a hug or a kiss or even held my hand while we watch TV. It's like I don't exist as his wife anymore. Of course there is no sex either and that used to be an important part of how we were close. I can't help but think that he has someone else outside of our marriage and I'm scared and my heart is breaking. Where can I find help?

RESPONSE FROM DR. ANNE KATZ:

This sounds like an awful time for you – please know that you are not alone and help is available. Firstly, it is not likely that your husband has found someone else. What has probably happened is that he has not been able to find the words to talk to you about the changes he has experienced (you said he's a man of action and few words!). As you may have read while doing your exploration on the internet, one of the most common side effects of surgery for prostate cancer is loss of erections. This often leads to men avoiding physical contact with their partner because they are afraid that the partner will think that any physical touch will lead to sex – and he can't perform. So he withdraws and, not uncommonly, the partner incorrectly thinks that the man has found someone else. This results in a mess and is most commonly far from the truth!

The first thing to do is to bring this up yourself. Don't just ask him if there is something wrong as he will likely say that everything's fine. You have to persist and tell him how YOU are feeling. Tell him that you miss holding hands, hugging, etc. and that has caused you to feel lonely. Tell him that it's not about sex but about TOUCH and feeling close and connected to him. He may not want to talk about it at first – but it's highly likely that he's feeling the same kind of loneliness and doesn't have the words to talk about it. Or he may be feeling embarrassed or ashamed. Talk in "I" sentences (don't talk about "You have not done this" or "You make me feel..." as this causes most people to become defensive and that is not helpful!). Communication challenges are not uncommon after treatment and many couples benefit from some professional help to get them talking about these important issues.

You can get help by seeing a counselor or therapist. A good source for professionals who deal with sexual and relationship problems is the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (<https://www.aasect.org/referral-directory>) that has a list of certified professionals from across the US and Canada.

Watch Dr. Katz' presentation on sexual health and intimacy from the Prostate Cancer Pathways for Patients and Caregivers event recorded at Englewood Health in Englewood, NJ on September 29, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2ZdDHw2WGY&t=8542s>.

Read previous issues of *Between the Sheets* at www.ustoo.org/BTS.

Do you have a question about sexual health or intimacy? If so, we invite you to send it to Us TOO. We'll select questions to feature in future *Between the Sheets* columns.

Please email your question to: ustooBTS@ustoo.org

Or mail your letter to:

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feature on sex and intimacy,
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