

Between the Sheets...

March 2021

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. Jeffrey Albaugh, PhD, APRN, CUCNS, Director of Sexual Health at NorthShore University HealthSystem and at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, IL. Dr. Albaugh is a board-certified advanced practice urology clinical nurse specialist, certified sexuality counselor and trained relationship counselor. He has completed Level 1 and 2 training from the Gottman Institute and has also trained with Andrew Christensen, PhD in Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy. In addition to his many publications in peer reviewed journals and chapters in books on sexual dysfunction, Dr. Albaugh published *Reclaiming Sex and Intimacy After Prostate Cancer Treatment*. He has been quoted in media and publications as an expert in the treatment of sexual dysfunction.

QUESTION FROM PROSTATE CANCER SURVIVOR:

Do you have any advice to improve communication with my wife? Sometimes it feels like we are just on completely different pages when we are trying to talk to each other, especially if we disagree.

RESPONSE FROM DR. JEFFREY ALBAUGH:

Thank you for your question and it is an important one to most couples. One of the number one issues identified by couples in relationship therapy is poor communication. It is important to approach communication with your partner from an open, receptive place. Keep in mind that you are on the same team as your partner. Your partner is not your adversary. The goal is not to be right, but rather to better understand each other and deepen the connection between you. You don't have to agree, but you can respect and understand each other's equally valid viewpoints. Remember you love this person.

When you want to communicate about something really important, you need to think about and carefully determine the best way to discuss it with your partner. You may want to process your own feelings prior to communicating with your partner. Think about an appropriate time to have the conversation. It is helpful to use "I" language rather than "you" language. No one wants to be criticized. Begin from a place of describing how you feel in light of a particular circumstance and also what you need from your partner. You must be specific and don't generalize using expletives (for example you may say, "I felt hurt when you pulled your phone out during our date night last night as we were talking and I need us both to put our phones aside when we are having quality time together" instead of "You always pull out your phone when we are talking and I really hate when you do that"). You may want to soften up your delivery and make sure you are coming from a place of love and not a place of anger.

How you listen is incredibly important. Remember you have one mouth and two ears, so you should be listening more than you are speaking. If you want to understand your partner's perspective and feelings as desperately as you want them to understand your perspective, you are ready to really listen and hear them. Listen carefully to your partner and don't interrupt them. After they finish, try and paraphrase and acknowledge back to them what you heard them say. Restating what you heard your partner say is a way of making sure you received the message while acknowledging the value of what your partner said to you (for example: "I understand that you felt hurt when I pulled out my phone during the conversation last evening and you need us to put our phones aside when we are talking"). Focusing on understanding, listening and restating rather than creating your defense as your partner is speaking puts the focus on the information from your partner rather than on you and on being right.

If one or both of you is feeling flooded, triggered or overwhelmed, it is okay to take a break from the conversation, but it is very important to plan for a time that you will come back to the conversation after you have had time to step back and process the argument. Unresolved issues can cause resentment, frustration and hurt feelings. It is important to avoid criticism, contempt (being disrespectful with a personal attack), defensiveness and stone walling (the silent treatment) according to world renowned couple therapist and researchers John and Julie Gottman (<https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling>). There are some great resources out there to help you have a better relationship and communicate better. You can find some helpful resources at <https://www.gottman.com/couples> and also at <https://www.psychalive.org/communication-between-couples>. Good communication is a critical component of a good relationship and can lead to deeper more meaningful intimacy.

You can access the new edition of my book at www.drjeffalbaugh.com.

Watch Dr. Albaugh's presentation on sexual health and intimacy from the *Prostate Cancer Pathways for Patients and Caregivers* event recorded at NorthShore University HealthSystem in Skokie, IL on November 3, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hiq0dDEb1l0&t=4483s>.

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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