

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](http://www.drannekatz.com))

### QUESTION FROM PROSTATE CANCER SURVIVOR:

*This question is more about my wife than me. I had surgery to remove my prostate for high-grade cancer nine months ago. My PSA didn't go down to zero and I had positive margins, so they recommended I have radiation and hormone therapy too. Due to the length of treatment we had to change our plans for the winter. We had to stay home in the Northeast and it has been a brutal winter, especially after being in Florida at this time for the past five years. The real problem is that my wife is driving me nuts! She's angry and sad, crying a lot or telling me that I'm not listening to her and I just want her to stop! I'm not really sure what she's so upset about – I'm the one with prostate cancer, I'm the one who can't get it up – doesn't she think it's upsetting to me too? But what can I do about it? What's done is done and here we are. How can I make her stop?*

### RESPONSE FROM DR. ANNE KATZ:

*Both of you are having a difficult time with what has happened to you. I have seen this exact scenario before. It boils down to a few important issues:*

- 1. She is worried about you and distressed about what has happened. She is also scared about what the future holds; if the first treatment (surgery) didn't work, then how confident is she that this second treatment (radiation plus androgen deprivation) will work too?*
- 2. She is grieving the change in your life together (more about this later). You mention not being able to "get it up" but her grief may be different from loss of erections and more general, perhaps related to not being able to spend the cold winter away somewhere warmer.*
- 3. Men and women, survivor and family member, deal with these kinds of situation differently. You have been able to "compartmentalize" what has happened to you. You are pragmatic in your response, as you stated: "What's done is done and here we are." She apparently is not able to look at things this same way – this is not uncommon as we all approach situations like this based in part on inherent personality traits and coping mechanisms.*
- 4. She is unloading her distress on you. It is well known that partners often are more distressed than survivors and are consumed with worry because of their love for the man with prostate cancer. It's difficult to see someone that you love struggle or suffer – and some men really do suffer through any and all treatments. But men are often stoic and don't disclose how much they are hurting and their spouse/partner is left "imagining" what they are going through, and also thinking about their hypothetical response to the same experience.*

*So what can be done to help BOTH of you? The answer lies in part in communicating openly and honestly, without trying to protect her feelings. Let her know what YOU are thinking about your treatment and how you are dealing with the uncertainty that you are most likely feeling too.*

*She (and you) should be encouraged to mourn the changes in your life together, both physical (loss of erections) and social (not going south for the winter). Let her know that you too are disappointed or angry about being stuck in the cold this winter – but hopefully next winter you can return to your usual patterns of escape.*

*Accept that she is worried and distressed – this is evidence of your importance in her life and how much she loves you. Accept that she may not employ the personality or coping mechanisms that you do to cope with what has happened. Just as you may not be able to deal with things emotionally, she is not able to be rational and pragmatic. Her distress may give you the opportunity to open up about your distress.*

*Suggest that she find a safe space where she can unload her feelings. A trusted friend or family member may serve that purpose, or perhaps a professional such as a social worker or therapist can provide her with the space and time to vent, something that she needs to do, so as not to pour out her feelings on you. This does not mean she is hiding anything from you, but it will certainly prevent you from your feelings of not trying to "fix" the situation or "mend" her distress. Another resource you might consider is the Us TOO "A Forum for Her" support group for female caregivers, visit <https://ustoo.org/aforumforher>.*

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](http://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](mailto:ustooBTS@ustoo.org)

Or mail your letter to:

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