

CHAPTER 12

Sexuality

In this chapter, you will:

- Discover how brain injury can alter one's expression of sexuality.
- Learn how to cope with altered expressions of sexuality.

Sexuality

Our sexuality is expressed by our social interactions and the roles we fulfill. When addressing issues relating to adult sexuality, the normal maturational cycles should be considered when reporting unusual patterns or behaviours. Brain injury may alter your expression of sexuality. Mother, father, child, lover, friend, employee, and caregiver are all roles that may be affected by an altered expression of sexuality resulting from a brain injury.

Since many people regard sexuality as a private matter, they are hesitant to discuss the topic. The purpose of this chapter is to let you

know that sexuality is an important issue and that it is okay to ask questions.

Concern about your expression of sexuality may vary depending on your age and role at the time of the brain injury. This may be of interest to you if you are married or hoping for a romantic relationship.

Many possible changes or concerns about sexuality can occur as a result of a brain injury. If you have questions about topics not covered here, do not hesitate to ask the health professionals working with you and your family or your local brain injury association (see Chapter 13 for contact information).

Common Changes

The most common changes after a brain injury include a decreased interest in sexual relationships, impotence, or uninhibited behaviour in inappropriate situations. In all cases, it is important to remember that this behaviour is the result of the brain injury.

Cognitive difficulties are often the source of inappropriate behaviour, such as uninhibited speech or actions, poor social judgment, and

misunderstanding social cues. You may say things out loud that others think but do not say. For example, where other people may only think in their head that a stranger is good-looking you may bluntly tell this stranger that you find them attractive. You may interpret friendliness as a sexual approach, and then be surprised by the rejection you experience when it is made clear that it was not a sexual approach.

Some changes may leave you vulnerable to exploitation. For example, impaired judgment may prevent you from recognizing a potentially dangerous situation, or you may lack the intuition that tells you when someone who seems friendly is really seeking to take advantage of you.

Social skills are an important part of sexuality, and difficulty with them will affect your relationship with others. If you have memory impairment, show little change in facial expression, or take longer to put thoughts into words, you may find it difficult to form friendships. Limited social relationships will reduce the possibility for a romantic relationship. This can obviously be the cause of much anxiety.

Depression is a common occurrence for both survivors and their families. Being depressed or “feeling down” can influence a person’s sexual desire. In this case, you may want to seek help from a professional counselor. Your local Alberta Brain Injury Network office may be able to help you find a counselor (see Chapter 13 for contact information).

Family Matters

Parents of a child with a brain injury may find that their sexual relationship with their spouse changes. Stress, fatigue, and intense emotions such as anger, guilt, and depression can affect sexual interest. This can lead to tension in the marriage.

A spouse who becomes a caregiver may find it difficult to maintain a sexual relationship, because the roles of caregiver and lover do not mix easily. Many caregiving spouses report a variety of reasons for their declining interest in sex. They may not have a lot of energy. The survivor’s appearance, behaviour, intellectual abilities, and personality may change, and they may no longer be the kind of person the spouse would have chosen as a sexual partner.

Some survivors have a dramatic increase or decrease in their interest in sex. If they have memory troubles and cannot remember when they last had intercourse with their partner, keeping a diary or written log may help regulate a give and take sexual relationship with their partner. If this continues to be a problem and is creating tension in the relationship, you may want to seek professional help.

Coping with Changes

Survivor Matters

To prevent inappropriate sexual behaviour and encourage appropriate behaviour, discuss and practice appropriate behaviour for specific situations. Memory difficulties may make it necessary for you to review and practice these lessons frequently. Since you may have trouble recognizing when you are behaving in an inappropriate manner, you may want to establish with your family and friends a discreet signal or phrase that they can use to tell you if you are acting inappropriately.

Family Matters

When the survivor behaves in a sexually inappropriate manner, deal with the situation in the same manner as any other inappropriate behaviour. Describe the behaviour to the

survivor, explain why it is inappropriate, and provide an appropriate alternative action.

Additionally, you and the survivor could agree on a prearranged signal/cue to alert the survivor if they are exhibiting inappropriate behaviour. If inappropriate behaviour persists, tell the survivor the behaviour is inappropriate and that you are going somewhere else and will not interact with them until the behaviour stops. The goal is that eventually the survivor will learn how to manage their own behaviour to a greater level.

Survivor Matters

Talking About Sexuality

Even though you may not feel comfortable discussing issues of sexuality with others, it is important for you to talk about what is happening and how you are feeling. Speak to a health professional who is familiar with brain injury and its effects, or talk to other survivors and their families. As a spouse, you may have feelings of guilt or anger about the changes in your relationship. These feelings are normal. Talking about them together with a knowledgeable person can help prevent further stress and depression.

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