

# THE HARLEY STREET CLINIC



# **Coping with Sexual Problems**

*(in the context of breast cancer)*

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## What this talk will cover:

The statistics

Some likely causes of sexual problems

Why we are so bad at talking to patients about sex?

Why bother to address sexual issues anyway?

Guidance for breast nurses to identify problems

Tools to help

Tips to build your confidence

Where to access further information

## **Incidence of sexual problems post treatment:**

80% of patients.....more information required

75% not raise topic themselves

70% no information from health care professional

30% some degree of dysfunction

Overall 35-50% some sexual difficulties following cancer treatment ( Ref: Darja Brandenburg 2012)

## **Likely causes of sexual problems:**

- Surgery.....scars, mastectomy.....affects on femininity
- Alteration of body image.....lack of confidence
- Hair loss, body hair, weight gain
- Hormonal changes....low libido
- Vaginal dryness
- Nausea and fatigue

## **Why sexuality not addressed:**

- Lack of training on sexuality
- Doctors/nurses may dismiss as less important....
- May see it as invasion of privacy...especially if unsure
- Lacking in confidence/embarrassment/willingness

## **Why are patients reluctant to discuss sex?**

- Feel embarrassed.....wanting to have sex
- Many feel there is nothing the HCP can do, why bother
- May be unaware that dysfunction is due to treatment
- May sense that HPS not comfortable with intimacy
- Reluctance may be due to cultural/religious/age

## Why bother to address sexual intimacy?

- Fulfil need to feel “normal”
- To console and comfort
- Fulfil need for physical closeness
- Sex can help relieve tension, reduces pain, improves self esteem
- Sex....life affirming



## **Role of breast care nurse:**

- Unique position to help patients
- Build relationship from diagnosis through to end of treatment and beyond
- Confidence in you therefore less inhibited
- You can include reference to sexuality from initial assessment....

## Tools to help you: P-LI-SS-IT Model

- Level 1:
- P = Permission. You as the breast nurse will raise the topic of sexuality and ask the patient about their sexual feelings and behaviours in the context of their cancer diagnosis. You will normalise this .....e.g other patients experience.....you will reflect back your willingness to hear their concerns...let them know you have heard/reflect back
- This gives the patient permission to discuss sexual matters now or later in their treatment

## **P-LI-SS-IT Model (contd)**

- Level 2
- LI = Limited information: at this level you would give limited information about sexual functioning and will correct any misinformation or myths. You can communicate your understanding of the problem, demonstrate empathy/non-judgemental. Many of your patients will benefit from this level of information and your role will be that of an educator.

## **P-LI-SS-IT Model (contd)**

- Level 3
- **SS = Specific Suggestions:** this level is for those of you who are more experienced breast care nurses and who feel confident about discussing sexual matters with your patients. This level involves you carrying out a full evaluation and will require counselling skills as well as information on the treatment and the side effects.

## **P-LI-SS-IT Model (contd)**

- Level 4:
- IT = Intensive Therapy: this level involves the provision of specialised treatment, e.g sex therapy
- You would have referred on before reaching this level!

## Tips to help you get started:

- Right environment.....time/privacy
- Sensitive introduction to topic.....part of holistic care
- Communication to the patient you are comfortable.....
- Equip yourself with as much information as possible so you feel empowered
- Examine your own personal attitudes and beliefs.....
- Make no assumptions.....
- Lesbian/bisexual/trans-sexual patients will have other issues.....
- Have the courage to listen
- Recognise your own limitations....
- Finally...the more you do it, the more confident you become....


## Where to access further information\_

- Macmillan Sex Zone: Has excellent information and short videos on how to have conversations with patients.
- Useful website: [www.journeythroughlife.co.uk](http://www.journeythroughlife.co.uk) to download booklet: “Sexuality after Cancer” by Darja Brandenburg et al ( Consultant Clinical Psychologist) . Gives excellent practical advise and tips.



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