Talking to Our Patients About Intimacy and Sexuality

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“Sexual dysfunction is one of the most demoralizing and disabling features of Parkinson Disease.”

- Gila Bronner MPH, MSW
Addressing Sexual Problems…

• Improves quality of life
• Relieves pain and reduces stress
• Improves patient’s compliance with treatment

Learning Objectives

• Understand the nature of sexual issues for couples when one has PD.
• Understand the importance of sexuality to self esteem, depression, and pain management.
• Acquire tools to discuss sexuality in a clinical setting.
• Learn how to educate patients and spouses about improving their emotional intimacy and sexual life.
Given that an Interdisciplinary Care Team is looking at the “whole person,” a patient’s sexual life can not be ignored. A person’s sexuality affects their mental, physical, and emotional health.

Physical Sexual Challenges for Patients

- Slowness of movement, tremor, and rigidity interferes with lovemaking.
- Reduced desire due to fatigue or medications
- Men struggle with getting or keeping erections, or delayed ejaculation.
- Women may experience dryness and pain.
- Sleep issues often require separate beds.
- Facial animation diminished.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Emotional Sexual Challenges for Patients</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reduced self esteem</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Depression and grief</td>
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<td>• Negative body image</td>
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<td>• Communication difficulties</td>
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<th>Sexual Challenges for Partners</th>
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<td>• Changing roles from partner to caregiver.</td>
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<td>• Tiredness from taking on more responsibilities.</td>
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<td>• Their own fear, anxiety, depression, grief.</td>
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<td>• Loss of sexual interest due to PD symptoms.</td>
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<td>• Inability to read nonverbal cues.</td>
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<td>• Loss of emotional connection.</td>
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Sexual Issues for Couples

- Established roles may change
- Change in sexual pattern
- Need for more communication
- Less spontaneity

Intervention

- Ask, Listen and Educate
- Prescribe meds
- Change meds
- Refer to a sexuality specialist
- Think in a multidisciplinary way.
Intervention

Ask, Listen and Educate

Why is it hard to ask about sex?
1. Our own embarrassment
2. Limited sexual vocabulary
3. Lack of knowledge
4. It feels invasive or too private

When We Ask…

- Normalizes sexuality
- Gives them permission to ask questions
- Allows us to refer back in subsequent appointments
- Enables us to educate or refer
- Eliminates misconceptions: sex is not important, patients are too old, too ill, are not interested.
Intervention

- **Prescribe meds** (to address erection issues, depression, anxiety, pain).
- **Change meds** (when appropriate, both PD and mood related).

Intervention: Refer to a Specialist

- American College of Sexologists
  [www.americancollegeofsexologists.org](http://www.americancollegeofsexologists.org)
- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists
  [www.aasect.org](http://www.aasect.org)
Intervention

Think in a Multidisciplinary way
Mental health counseling
Physical therapy
Sex therapist
Medical doctor

Educate
Expand the definition of SEX

Sexual activity w/out penetration
(kissing, sensual or erotic touch)

Measure pleasure rather than “sexual performance” or achieving a specific goal.

Physical Intimacy Options

• Sensual Touch/Non demand pleasing
• Orgasm in non-penetrative ways
• “Penis visiting the vagina”
• Naked holding
• Find new ways to stimulate each other
• Showering or taking a bath together
• Giver/Receiver exercise
Examine Their (and Your) Beliefs and Assumptions

- I should be hard.
- I should orgasm.
- I have no desire.
- He always wants sex.
- We don’t have sex very often.
- At our age we should...

Emotional Intimacy Options

- Spend uninterrupted time together focused on each other.
- Have fun.
- Step away from technology.
- Read to each other.
- Be compassionate and kind with each other. Use appreciations frequently.
Communication

- Talk before, during, and after sex.
- Brainstorm together/share the problem.
- Be positive, rather than demands, complaints, blame.

Communication

- PD offers couples a “second chance” to increase communication and intimacy.
- Developing intimate communication in a relationship will have a positive impact on the long term effects of PD. (Bronner)
Minimize Anxiety

• Be sensitive to old expectations or “should’s.”
• Let go of thoughts, come back to the body.
• What am I a “Yes” to?

The Cliff Notes

• Bring it up in the intake, then refer back
• Focus on pleasure, not function
• Hold space for the loss “A new normal”
• Watch your assumptions/judgments
• Broaden definitions, clarify vocabulary
The goal in sexual intimacy is mutual enjoyment and pleasure.
Focus on comfort, relaxation, and pleasure, rather than performance.

Questions ???
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