

Cancer and Sexuality by Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Studies have demonstrated increased survival for married people diagnosed with cancer over single people. On the other hand, a cancer diagnosis can be emotionally hard on both the person with the diagnosis and the spouse, as well as threaten the relationship. Any unresolved patterns or issues between couples will be exacerbated by stress, and a cancer diagnosis is a huge stress.

We are a couple who work as a therapist team helping couples create closer loving connections. One of the important ways couples connect is through their sexuality. When Bob was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2006 we used all the skills we taught other couples to ensure that our sexual relationship stayed strong throughout the cancer journey.

Some of the tools we found important were:

1. **Presence:** The only important moment is the one we are in, the here and now. A cancer diagnosis can pull people towards a frightening uncertain or painful future. Learning to be present with what was really going on was assisted through our mindfulness practice. We also continually reminded ourselves to focus on what we could control, and let go of the rest. Presence allowed us to remain physically and sexually connected throughout the cancer journey.
2. **Emotional literacy:** Often our sex lives suffer when we are under stress because we are locked in anger or fear and don't know how to express it in safe and friendly ways. Learning to express authentic emotions in a non-blaming way became very important to both of us as we journeyed through the fear of what was happening, and the future.
3. **Approaching our discomfort:** We learned to understand the four ways our fear showed itself. We had been familiar with fight or flight. We now realized that there were two other ways our fear could express itself: freeze or faint. The fight response looks like anger and the flight response can be seen as avoidance. Freezing and fainting are best understood as physiological responses which can be observed in the animal kingdom, the deer caught in our approaching headlights is in freeze response and the mouse that has been caught by a cat is in faint response. Remaining connected while we were afraid required us to approach our fear rather than to move away from it. Sharing our vulnerable and scary sides created a flow of creativity and support. We focused on getting curious and creative rather than avoiding.
4. **Revealing:** Concealing creates a predictable cycle of withdrawing and believing the other person is not safe. Revealing is a "magic move". Various aspects of a couple's relationship are affected by the cancer experience. Depression, fatigue, nausea, erectile dysfunction, vaginal dryness, and other physical or emotional problems may lower sex drive or make intercourse difficult or painful. All of these may be accompanied by fear of disfigurement and the impact on your own body image or on your partner. Learning to talk openly about everything that was going on was important. Our practice involved telling the truth in an unarguable way, focusing on what our body was experiencing. This proved to be an aphrodisiac.

Marlene and Bob Neufeld are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com.

5. **Generous listening:** Revealing works best within a climate of being heard deeply. We used a technique we teach our clients of listening with our hearts for what our partner was really saying, of reflecting it back to ensure that we were hearing accurately, of listening for the emotions that were or were not being expressed, of listening for what the other person really wanted or needed, and of then validating what made sense to us. This kind of listening requires you not to judge or criticize what you or your partner is saying and feeling.
6. **Curiosity:** Part of the treatment of Bob's cancer involved taking a testosterone-reducing drug. The oncologist told him directly he would experience total loss of desire. We got curious, and learned that desire doesn't just come from hormones, it also comes from intention. We set the intention to remain sexually active throughout the period, letting go of the goal of intercourse and focusing instead on giving and receiving pleasure to and from each other. We viewed the lowering of physical desire as an opportunity to experiment and learn something about ourselves and each other.
7. **Focusing on appreciation:** Another important aspect of many cancer treatments is changes in our physical appearance. For all of us, especially women, body image is an important part of our sexuality. Our ability to express appreciation of ourselves and each other became very important during this journey.
8. **Generating Joy:** Bob set the intention to go through treatment with joy. He laughed often, danced from the parking lot to the radiology clinic, and breathed deeply. He meditated daily focusing on loving his body deeply and imaging his body being rid of cancerous cells. Feeling like a victim of the experience is easy for anyone with a cancer diagnosis. However, feeling and acting like a victim can reliably bring out the rescuer or blamer in others. This results in something we call the "drama triangle". Everything Bob did that kept him out of victim mentality opened him up to more vulnerability and ability to remain connected to Marlene.
9. **Non-sexual touch:** We learned about the importance of at least 30 seconds of full-body relaxed hugging daily to relax and stay connected. Hugging for at least 30 seconds actually releases hormones which connect people to each other.

We strongly urge couples with a cancer diagnosis to not lose sight of their relationship during this stressful time. Your relationship can be your greatest resource. If you aren't feeling as close as you want to, get help.