



UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS THAT MAY IMPACT EMOTIONAL INTIMACY, SEXUAL FEELINGS, AND RESPONSES

WORKSHOP HANDOUT

Changes in sexual feelings and responses are very common in women and men with MS. These changes are the result of changes in the central nervous system – just like other symptoms of MS – as well as other symptoms of MS, the side effects of some symptom management medications, and feelings and attitudes that can interfere with sexual interest and arousal.

Sexual symptoms are as worthy of your – and your healthcare providers' – attention as any other MS symptom. Since healthcare providers may not routinely ask about sexual function, it is essential for you to educate yourselves and self-advocate for the help you need.

- **Disease-related changes**
 - Changes in the central nervous system that can affect women and men – *reduced interest/arousal, sensory changes or loss of sensation, difficulty reaching orgasm*
 - Symptoms of MS that can interfere with sexual interest and activity – *fatigue, pain, stiffness, bladder/bowel problems, depression, cognitive changes*
 - Some medications used to treat symptoms – *bladder medications, antidepressants, anti-spasticity medications*
- **Psychosocial factors**
 - Stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues
 - Attitudes about sexuality and disability; changes in self-esteem
 - Changes in roles within your partnership that impact self-concept and self-esteem

Emotional closeness, trust, and connection lay the foundation for sexual intimacy – the brain is our largest and most essential sexual organ

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES

- Communication challenges (between partners AND between PwMS and their healthcare providers are often the biggest barrier)
 - Start talking to each other: acknowledging challenges and sharing feelings is an act of trust and intimacy
 - Keep in mind that silence is easily misinterpreted as not caring, or no longer feeling attracted, or being attracted to someone else!
 - If you need help jump-starting the conversation, consider talking to a counselor with expertise in MS [call the National MS Society for a referral]
- Bring the problems to the attention of your healthcare providers – they can't help if they don't know about it
 - The neurologist and nurse can make referrals and provide help with symptom management



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- Be open to doing things differently – the more open you are to being creative, flexible, using adaptive strategies and tools, the more enjoyable your intimacy is likely to be
 - Pick your time and place for optimal comfort, energy, privacy
 - Create an environment that is soothing and relaxing
 - Take time to learn how MS has changed the way your body feels and responds – and then teach your partner what feels good and what doesn't, what position works and what doesn't, what time of the day is best
- Nurture the aspects of your relationship that provide a foundation for sexual intimacy
 - Shared goals and priorities
 - Shared activities
 - A relationship in which each person gives and receives
 - Demonstrations of affection through actions and physical contact

POSSIBLE CONVERSATION STARTERS

- **With Your Partner**
 - "I know I haven't seemed like myself lately. I'd really like to try to explain to you how my body feels these days so you won't think that I'm not interested or that you're doing something wrong. Talking will really help."
 - "I'm concerned that I'm doing something wrong or not doing things that feel good to you. Could we talk about how MS might be affecting our sexual relationship? I really want to try and understand."
- **With Your Healthcare Provider**
 - "I'd like to schedule a separate appointment to talk about how MS seems to be affecting my sex life. This is important to me and I want to learn what I can do to manage the changes and MS symptoms that seem to get in the way."

RESOURCES

Eve's Garden – a discreet catalog of sex gadgets, toys, and books – www.evesgarden.com

The Guide to Getting it On – by Paul Joannides – an excellent book about sexuality that includes a section on people with disabilities

Intimacy & Sexuality – a brochures from the National MS Society (free to download at www.nationalMSSociety.org or request by calling 1-800-344-4867)