

PAIN RELIEF FOUNDATION

www.painrelieffoundation.org.uk

CHRONIC PAIN & SEX

INTRODUCTION

- ◆ Chronic pain can affect many aspects of daily life, one of which is the maintenance of a healthy sex life. There are numerous reasons why pain can reduce sexual function, and of course, many couples experience temporary difficulties with their sex lives from time to time, regardless of whether one partner has a pain problem or not. When pain enters into a relationship, sexual difficulties may occur because of external factors; because the pain sufferer is having problems; because the partner is having problems or a combination of all these factors.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

◆ Advice of others

You may have been advised not to undertake any physical activity by your doctor or health adviser, but more often than not, the issue of sexual activity is simply ignored by health professionals. If you are seriously concerned that any physical activity will cause you harm, then it is wise to seek advice. However, enjoying a healthy sex life with a beloved partner can bring such important benefits and is unlikely to cause harm.

◆ Drugs

If medication leads to feelings of drowsiness or lethargy, then making the effort to initiate or respond to sexual advances may seem too much like hard work. Some drugs such as amitriptyline or carbamazepine (used to combat nerve pain) may interfere with sexual function, either by loss of libido or preventing the ability to achieve an erection. If you think that your medication may be affecting your ability to enjoy sex, then it is worth visiting your GP, who may be able to prescribe an alternative.

- ◆ Another medical issue, which deserves a mention here, is contraception. Fear of pregnancy may be enhanced if day to day life is already difficult because of pain, and a visit to the local family planning clinic can remove that added stress.

◆ Other stresses

People in pain are not the only people who may have difficulties with sex. Other stresses in life commonly have an effect on relationships, for example financial problems or other family problems.

FACTORS FROM WITHIN THE RELATIONSHIP

◆ You

A person's sexuality is about more than just the act of lovemaking. Feelings of masculinity or femininity may be reduced if your role has changed because of pain, for example by loss of employment, financial independence or homemaking abilities. Making an effort to become more involved in day to day activities with a partner can help to open lines of communication and lead to both of you feeling more valued.

How you feel about yourself will affect how you respond to your partner. You can start by ensuring that you look good - taking care of personal hygiene, getting dressed every day, shaving regularly, getting a new hairstyle, buying some new clothes. These efforts will raise your self-esteem and help you to feel more desirable - and give you less of a shock when you walk past a mirror! Looking good will help your partner to fancy you (again), and help you both to see beyond the pain to the person within.

◆ Motivation

Maybe you just cannot be bothered to try to rebuild a sex life. Chronic pain can drain your energies as you try to cope with everyday life, and boosting a relationship may seem to require a level of energy which you feel you lack. However, helping you to learn to focus away from your pain is one of the main focuses of the Pain Management Programme, and what better way than by working towards the pleasures of good sex? You may feel that you are just too tired, especially if pain disturbs your sleep - remember that a little physical activity at bedtime is relaxing and helps to promote a good night's sleep!

◆ Fear of movement

Of course, lovemaking requires you to hold and be held by your partner, and to exercise joints and muscles. If you are frightened of your pain increasing with movement, then you are likely to become tense, and even avoid physical contact. You may need to start by working on the exercises learnt on the Programme to help you to become more supple and confident about exercise. You may have got into the habit of avoiding physical contact or tensing up if your partner approaches you, which may be interpreted as rejection.

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◆ Your partner

Fear of causing harm

Your partner is a witness to your day to day struggles to cope with pain, and may be fearful that cuddling you will cause an increase in pain, especially if you have pushed them away in the past. Your partner may have simply given up trying to approach you in a sexual way, maybe feeling that you no longer care for them.

Your partner as your carer

The nature of a loving relationship may alter if one of the partners has to provide intimate care for the other.

MAKING CHANGES

If you have read this far, you may have decided that you would like to begin to rebuild your sex life, but are unsure how to start. Read on...

◆ Communication

It is surprising that, in this day and age, when sex is discussed and portrayed daily on television and in the media, that many people find discussing sexual matters embarrassing and to be avoided. However, if you and your partner are going to please each other sexually, then talking is the first step. Your partner may not know that it is your pain that causes you to avoid sex and physical contact. Talking and listening to each other, in a relaxed and non-confrontational way is essential - you may like to open channels of communication by showing your partner these pages.

◆ Start slowly

Think back to the early days of your courtship - holding hands, kissing, getting to know each other physically and emotionally, maybe cuddling up on the couch to watch a movie. Set aside time for each other. Each of these gentle steps can lead on to something better!

◆ Get fit

By following exercises you have learnt on the Pain Management Programme, you can become more flexible and reduce your pain, so that sexual activity is no longer an activity to be feared or avoided. You may also become more independent, so that your partner no longer needs to be your carer, and can return to being your lover.

◆ Comfortable positions

Once you feel ready to make love again, you may need to be a little more adventurous than in the past, perhaps using cushions to support your back. A warm bath may be helpful to reduce pain and relax muscles, and you may benefit from taking appropriate painkillers half an hour before you begin to make love.

Some pain conditions prevent people managing sexual intercourse, but that does not need to prevent them from enjoying a rewarding sex life, using alternatives such as foreplay and massage. Sex is about giving as well as receiving, enjoying each other's bodies and reminding each other how much you love each other. You may no longer be able to leap off the top of the wardrobe, but then not many of us ever could.

Further sources of information.

Spine-Dr.com "Sex and the back: Taking the pain out of sex" leaflet available online. www.spine-dr.com/site/sex/sex_article1.html

Pain Concern www.painconcern.org.uk The Gateway, 85-101 Sankey Street, Warrington WA1 1SR. Phone: 0300 123 0789

MedicineNet.com www.medicinenet.com An American online source of health and medical information. "Pain Management: Maintaining intimacy" Leaflet available online.

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Back Pain	Fibromyalgia	Headache
Trigeminal Neuralgia	Sciatica	Diabetes Pain
Arthritis	Phantom Limb Pain	CRPS
Shingles & PHN	Cancer Pain	Drugs for nerve pain
Strong opioids for chronic pain	Over the counter medicines for pain	
Central Post Stroke Pain		

Disclaimer: If you have a pain problem which needs treatment you must contact your own doctor. He can refer you to a pain clinic in your area. This leaflet is for information only and should not be treated as a substitute for the medical advice of your doctor. The Pain Relief Foundation cannot offer individual medical advice.