

Sexuality and Intimacy after a Brain Injury

Following a traumatic brain injury there can be many changes to sexual response or none at all. There may be changes immediately following the injury that last for several months or more and then disappear. This can be very confusing for both the person with the brain injury and their partner or family. Some of the changes may be permanent.

Some people are ready to discuss changes to sexuality within the first few months, while others may not be ready to talk about them for many years. Everyone's situation is unique and may depend on the severity of the injury, whether they have a partner or not and whether the changes are important to them. Even if there are changes to sexuality they may not be of concern to the person with a brain injury or their partner.

All Brain Injuries Are Unique

It is difficult to predict the physical consequences of a brain injury because we know very little about the brain and sexual functioning. It is true that both the location and the extent of the damage in the brain determine some aspects of your sexual functioning.

Brain injuries vary widely and there can be many different factors that contribute to sexual concerns.

Some of these factors are:

- Memory loss
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Trouble focusing
- Bowel /bladder issues
- Effects of medication
- Changes to sensation
- Altered hormone levels
- Weakness or paralysis
- Spasms
- Pain
- Communication difficulties
- Role changes in the relationship

What is also important is how you and your partner react to the injury and the changes. How you respond psychologically or emotionally depends on many personal factors. Your personal response will depend on how confident you were sexually before the injury and how comfortable you felt talking about sex. Your own values and beliefs about sexuality and disability will also affect how easy it is for you to adjust to your body now.

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Some Common Concerns Following a Brain Injury

- Changes to how their body responds sexually such as: erection/ejaculation changes; changes to vaginal lubrication, or problems with arousal and/or orgasm.
- Physical concerns such difficulty with sexual positions or managing bowel or bladder functioning.
- Changes to how positively they see themselves as a sexual person.
- Changes to sexual relationships, for example, starting a new intimate relationship or maintaining an existing relationship.
- Some people have more difficulty using socially acceptable forms of communication in expressing sexuality following a brain injury. This can be very difficult for those people around them.

Getting Help

Adjusting to the many changes following a brain injury can be very stressful for both the person with a brain injury and their partners and families. It is not uncommon for some difficult sexual behaviours to be present early in the recovery process. Many times these behaviours go away as the recovery process continues. Talking with health care staff can help you to understand and cope with these and other changes.

Medical Disclaimer: The above information is not intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Always ask your physician or other qualified health professional about any matter concerning your individual health.

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For further information: Contact the Sexual Health Rehab Service, GF Strong Rehab Centre

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