

Caregiving and Sex: A Complicated Mix

If your illness or disability requires that you need some assistance for daily needs you will need to find someone to care for you at home. This can be challenging – some people don't feel comfortable having a stranger help them with private things such as bathing or assistance going to the bathroom. There are also financial considerations that you will need to think about.

Immediately following an injury or the onset of a disability many partners volunteer to become your caregiver. This is normal and sometimes expected by rehabilitation staff. It costs less money and you will not need to have a stranger providing care in your home. It is important that partners and other family members learn how to take care of you. At the same time it is important that you both consider the impact that this could have on your relationship.

Making sure that caregiving and intimacy do not get mixed up

If your partner is also your personal caregiver then they are taking on two roles. There can be much more physical and emotional stress, resentment, and fatigue.

Prevent these problems from happening by talking with your partner and rehabilitation team about this. Search out as many resources as possible to diminish the caregiving that your partner will need to do. Some people may have the financial resources to enable them to hire someone and in other cases, friends or other family members may be able to help out.

Should my partner, husband, wife or lover be the person who is my day to day caregiver?

For many people it is difficult to be a caregiver, for example, assisting with toileting or dressing, and then to switch over to being a lover. The caregiver/partner may also become very tired and thus less likely to want to engage in sexual activity.

Having your partner attend to your personal hygiene needs **can** change the nature of your relationship. Many people say that helping with bowel or bladder care makes it difficult to see their partner in a sexual or romantic way. For others this isn't the case, but it is a risk and certainly something to discuss with your partner.

If you have decided that your partner will be your primary caregiver it is important to do the following to help maintain the sexual and loving part of your relationship.

- Make sure both of you are totally comfortable with the decision.
- Work hard at maintaining good communication. If any difficult feelings start to arise it is important that they get dealt with early.

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- Make sure you each have time alone and have leisure activities that you do on your own.
- Make time for fun and dating to help correct any imbalance – it is very easy to let caregiving become the total focus.
- Maintain equality within the relationship and find ways for both partners to make significant and meaningful contributions – such as working, parenting, generating income, doing household chores or money management. Technology helps – use it.
- Get backup help organized before the need arises. Plan to have relatives, friends or hired caregivers available if your partner is ill or overtired.
- Invite friends over or go visiting. It is important to decrease any isolation either of you may experience.
- Join a caregiver support group to learn new ideas and resources.
- The caregiver/partner needs to take care of their own health by getting enough rest and eating well.
- Schedule regular respite care for a day or several weeks so the caregiver/partner can have a day off or go on a holiday.

I would like to become sexually involved with the person I have hired to be my caregiver. Are there any problems with this?

There are several things to be aware of. Again you are asking one person to have 2 big roles – caregiver and sexual partner. Many times one or both of the roles can become compromised and you may experience disruptions to caregiving or the loss of the sexual relationship.

Like any sexual relationship that takes place in a work environment – things can get tricky if the relationship ends. Your care may be affected if there is lots of tension.

Many caregivers have professional or agency policies that prohibit sexual or romantic contact with their clients. It is important that they not violate these policies in order to protect you and preserve a professional and respectful caregiving relationship. If possible you should try to pick (with that person) which role that person should have in your life. If having a sexual or romantic relationship with this person is the most important then you should pursue that but find someone else to become your caregiver.

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