

Relationships and Disability

Following the onset of a disability or chronic illness many people have questions about how dating and romantic relationships might be affected.

- Will anyone be interested in me again?
- Will I be able to satisfy my partner?
- Will my relationship end now?
- How can I talk about sex with my partner?
- It's hard to be sexual again after my injury. How can we get things started again?

Establishing new relationships

Feeling sexually confident is crucial in many aspects of life. The need for intimacy and partnership is common to all societies around the world.

One of the most common questions that people with disabilities ask is, "Who's going to want to go out with me now?" If you are asking this question it is crucial that you realize that it is YOU who is saying this; it is a reflection of your thoughts and not necessarily how others may feel about dating you. If you don't feel particularly sexual or sexually attractive it may affect the subtle messages you send to others about your availability.

Try these things:

- Make sure that you are actually going out, to take classes, participate in recreation or to volunteer in the community, instead of staying home. Going out to meet new people can be scary but if you do not go where other people are, the chances of you meeting a potential partner are slim.
- Experiment by behaving "as if" you are an incredibly sexy and wonderful date.
- Wear clothes or jewelry that really contributes to your own feelings of attractiveness.

Many people with disabilities tell us that they meet nicer people now that they are in a wheelchair. The most significant thing that you can do to attract other people to you is to present yourself to the world as a happy and confident person.

The early stages of most new relationships can be awkward. You may need to be creative in finding accessible places to socialize. It can also be uncomfortable to bring up the topic of sex with a new partner - whether you have a disability or not.

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For best success it helps to find a non-sexual time to talk when there is less pressure on both of you. Discuss the challenges in being sexual with a person with a disability in a frank, matter of fact tone. You will need to find a time and the precise words that you are comfortable with. It helps if you feel comfortable in your own knowledge about how your body responds sexually. If you haven't yet been sexual and are not sure of how things will go; be honest about this.

Rejection is always possible. Remember that it may not be your disability that ruins your chances. It may be that the other person is simply not interested. Remind yourself that there are no foolproof ways for anyone to meet a mate.

Changed relationships

After the onset of a disability or illness, many people have concerns about their relationships changing. All couples will have to adapt.

It is important to make sure you are setting aside time to be intimate and to stay connected even if there are physical challenges. Even while you are hospitalized you can plan to have no visitors except your partner one night each week so the two of you can talk together.

You may each have different questions about how the disability may affect sexual functioning. Make sure that both of you get your questions answered. Understanding the sexual changes you may be experiencing and how to manage them is crucial to re-establishing a healthy relationship.

As you begin to be sexually intimate again it is especially helpful to have a sense of humour as you explore new positions and new kinds of touch.

There can also be changes in the roles you have within the relationship. For example, one partner may have been the more nurturing one; after an injury or disability that person may have to learn to receive care and attention. Similarly, one partner may have been more active physically during sex and may now need to be less active. It is common that the nature of established roles – even when they are not explicitly sexual – do change somewhat.

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