

The Triple 'S'

Gila Bronner explores how using a 'sensual approach' involving senses, sensuality and sexuality can be beneficial

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Sexuality is an important aspect of human behaviour that encompasses a relationship, physical and emotional intimacy, feelings, thoughts and interpersonal interaction. Sexuality and sexual function are affected by the interaction of physiological, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social and cultural influences. Age is also an important factor that changes sexual behaviour and function. Sexuality has the potential to become

happiness to people, but may also cause a lot of distress and unhappiness.¹

There is an increasing awareness among health professionals that sexual dysfunction is a real problem, affecting the health, emotional well-being and quality of life of men and women. Doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff, being at the front line of healthcare services, realise they have a major role in incorporating and advocating sexual health rights into their routine interventions. The right to sexual health and the right to enjoy and control sexual and reproductive behaviour have been recognised by the World Health Organization as fundamental human rights. According to a WHO declaration published some years ago, men and women are entitled to be free of fear, shame, guilt, false beliefs and organic disorders that might inhibit normal sexual response and impair sexual relationships.

Sexual dysfunction

Sexual dysfunction is common in Parkinson's disease (PD). Sexual dysfunction represents one of the demoralising and disabling features of PD, decreasing both desire and function and resulting in reduced frequency of sexual activity. In a study investigating the premorbid and present sexual functioning of Israeli men and women with PD², about three-quarters of the participants reported deterioration in their sexual functioning since the onset of the disease and one-quarter reported cessation of sexual activity. Impaired sexual function in PD is multifactorial. Depression, physical disability and autonomic dysfunction may contribute to the increased prevalence of erectile dysfunction (ED) in men and arousal disorders in women.^{2,3}

Four factors are involved in the deterioration of the sexual health of patients with chronic disease, like people with PD⁴:

1. Sexual dysfunction caused directly by the illness itself
2. Treatment methods
3. General consequences of chronic illness (fatigue, weakness, slowness, concentration problems)



4. Psychological problems accompanying the illness (loss of control, loss of self-esteem, depression, anxiety, body image problems, difficulties due to role changes, early retirement and disability). The active combat and the emotional crisis accompanying a chronic illness leaves patients with chronic and relentless fatigue and stress.

Our clinical experience showed an association between reduced sexual function, decreased couple intimacy and increased marital tension. Results from studies published in the last two years have described a significant association between ED in men and deterioration in their partner's sexual function. These studies showed that when ED was successfully treated, a significant improvement in the female sexual function was reported. In addition, we found in our clinic that people with impaired sexual function refrained from touching their sexual partners. They avoided caressing, hugging or kissing their partner. The lack of any sexual, intimate or just caring expressions between spouses resulted in reducing their potential sensuality.

Sensuality and sexuality

Many people confuse the terms 'sensuality' and 'sexuality', thinking they are synonymous. There are overlapping areas between these two terms. It is a bit confusing, especially when we inspect the definition of sexuality as a holistic phenomenon that is much more than its physical components (desire, arousal and orgasm). There is also no doubt that sensuality is a key ingredient for a richer sexual expression. However, sexuality is not the only arena for sensual expressions. People can be sensual in many other aspects, not only during intercourse. Sensuality is something much broader. Sensuality is a way of fully experiencing life through awareness, presence and the exploration of your senses. Thus, being sensual creates a fuller and more satisfying life for the individual.

Formal and informal messages regarding sex education, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, limit the sensual alternatives for many people. We grow up learning that if we wish to be sensual, we must have sex. If there are limitations or physical disabilities that prevent us from sexual activities, we lose all the opportunities to express our sensuality.

For people with PD and their partners, the burden of the disease makes it so easy to forget to use senses and be sensual. Easily they forget to notice and enjoy the little things that happen every day. While



experiencing health and sexual changes along the course of the disease, they focus on the struggle. Due to the physical and the emotional disabilities caused by PD and its treatments, people with PD and their spouses suddenly discover that time and life pass by without sensing them.

A sensual approach

In our workshops we try to make a change. Taking a sensual approach begins with showing up, noticing and hopefully enjoying what life is offering them. The first step is focusing on the five main senses:

- Vision (seeing)
- Audition (hearing)
- Taste, smell and touch (feeling).

Those who have lost their sense of smell can focus on other senses. During the workshop they experience the use of senses. They listen to music, watch pictures, colours, move, smile, look into the eyes of the other participants, they taste, hold hands and use their imagination. With the right state of mind, they can enrich the sensual experience in their life and adapt this approach to the intimate experience as well. Practising daily means focusing while eating chocolate or enjoying a meal, meditating or breathing deeply, walking in the park, feeling the wind on one's face, watching a sunset, swimming and feeling the body move, looking into the face of a loved one or watching an artistic show. These activities develop an individual's capability to be sensual.

The sensual approach is a way to allow passion (not limited to sexual activity) into everyday life and to make people with PD feel more and more grateful and appreciative, even in challenging times.

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References

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