



# INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY FOLLOWING TBI

## A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence



U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Zachary T. Beatty

### HOW CAN TBI AFFECT INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY?

Intimacy is the ability to engage in, and derive pleasure from, emotional closeness and sexual activities. After a TBI, couples may find it difficult to reconnect intimately. This can be due to feelings of emotional distance or frustrations related to caregiver responsibilities. Partners' needs and desires for intimacy can also change after TBI, leading to feelings of rejection, conflict, and withdrawal. Some may experience reduced sexual interest, feeling that sex is simply a chore, and engage just to "keep the peace."

Despite the reality that some injuries make it difficult or impossible to have the same level of sexual activity as before, a satisfying sex life may still be possible. Communication, compassion, and creativity in finding new ways of expressing emotional and sexual needs can help couples rebuild loving and respectful relationships. These newly rebuilt relationships can end up being as close as, or even closer than they were before.

### HOW CAN TBI AFFECT SEXUAL FUNCTIONING AND BEHAVIOR?

The brain regulates many aspects of sexuality. Even slight damage from a TBI can affect how sexual urges are expressed and how sexual organs will work. Sexual difficulties after TBI can develop from both physical and emotional changes. Examples include pain, weakness or coordination challenges, and changes in thinking processes, emotions, or self-esteem.

One of the most challenging behaviors reported after TBI is inappropriate sexual behavior. Your loved one may appear to have a greater sex drive and seem preoccupied with sex, often at inappropriate times. They can also display the opposite behavior; showing no desire or interest to engage in sexual activities. Keep in mind that this behavior is not intentional, but is most likely from damage to the part of the brain that regulates impulses and urges. It is important to understand the reason for such changes, so that you do not misinterpret these behaviors as lack of care or respect.

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## WHAT ARE SOME TIPS I CAN USE TO IMPROVE INTIMACY AFTER TBI?

**Find opportunities for closeness that don't involve sex.** Do thoughtful things for each other, such as leaving an affectionate note or caring for the children so your partner can have relaxation time. Small expressions of affection, such as a hug, kiss, or touch on the shoulder, can go a long way.

**Communicate, even about difficult topics, to deepen feelings of connection.** Discuss feelings, hopes, and desires when both of you are calm and ready to listen. Talking about concerns provides an opportunity for reassurance and support. Working to understand each other's perspective can help you more easily identify solutions. Try the [Couples Coach](#) VA app designed to help improve communication and satisfaction in relationships.

**Practice safe sex.** Possible changes to thinking and memory may make it difficult to remember to use protection. If using condoms, plan ahead so that they are always available. Consider setting reminders if you're using birth control pills or using a device that must be periodically replaced.

**Respect the need for alone time and space.** Create time to independently pursue individual activities and interests. This is important in building a strong relationship and may encourage emotional and sexual intimacy.

**Redefine the goal of intimacy.** A new goal can be mutual pleasure and expression of love rather than erection, intercourse, and orgasm.

**Create space in your relationship to experiment.** Try to develop greater variation in sexual activities and be open to pursue them without judgment. It is important to communicate any changes in emotional and sexual needs, including sources of arousal. Doing so can enhance mutual understanding and foster relationship resiliency.

**Schedule opportunities for intimacy.** Set aside time for intimacy when both of you are more likely to be available and ready to participate.

**Spend time doing things you both enjoy.** Plan a date night, participate in a sport, or take a class together. Learning new things as a couple can bring you closer.

## WHEN SHOULD I SPEAK TO A PROVIDER ABOUT INTIMACY CHALLENGES?

There are several factors that can interfere with the enjoyment of physical affection and intimacy. Pain, bodily changes, medications and mental health challenges, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse, can all affect sexual desire and performance.

If pain is an issue, try new sexual positions that are comfortable for you and your partner. Finding a comfortable position sometimes requires using a cushion or pillow to reduce the pressure on sensitive body parts. There are also options for sexual aids specifically developed to optimize sexual expression when bodily changes have occurred. Sometimes, common medications

used to treat mental health conditions can cause sexual side-effects, such as low libido and difficulties with arousal and climax. Ask your health care provider about the possibility of adjusting any medications that may be causing negative sexual side-effects.

Know that it is okay to feel uncomfortable speaking about sexual changes. If you feel distressed talking directly with your provider about this topic, consider using a different approach, such as sending an email. It may help to keep in mind that sexuality is a normal part of human functioning, and problems with sexuality can be addressed, just like any other medical problem. If you feel more focused support would be beneficial, speak to a counselor, couples counselor or sex therapist.



For more information and resources, refer to TBICoE's [Traumatic Brain Injury: A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans](#).