

What Do I Need to Know?



Some Facts

- Sexual dysfunction and problems with intimacy are common in both men and women.
- Many different factors may lead to sexual dysfunction or problems with intimacy. These include: mental or emotional factors, hormonal problems, nerve problems, circulation problems or side effects of medicines.
- Depression, performance anxiety, and distraction are common mental causes of impotence.

Therapy may include:

Individual therapy and/or couples therapy, new medicine or adjustments in current medicines.

I have more questions concerning Caregiver Support. Where can I go for help?

Contact the Caregiver Support Line at **1-855-260-3274** and/or visit the VA's Caregiver Support website at **www.caregiver.va.gov**.

Changes to Expect

Intimacy and sexual function can be affected by many different types of injuries including physical or disfiguring injuries and mental or emotional trauma.

Physical changes will vary depending on the injury. Both women and men may suffer injuries that can lead to nerve damage, pain, decreased sex drive, urinary incontinence or overall lack of energy. It is possible for severe or disfiguring injuries to make sexual intercourse a painful physical experience.

Mental changes can be caused by psychological or neurological disorders that change how a person experiences and expresses emotion. These conditions can reduce a person's interest in intimacy and can affect his or her ability to understand the needs of others. In some cases, for example, brain injuries may cause hyper-sexuality, being excessively interested and/or involved in sexual activity. Some medicines used to treat depression and anxiety can reduce sex drive (libido) and the ability to reach orgasm.

Emotional changes may include questions of self-worth, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and fear of rejection.

What Does This Mean for Me?

As a Caregiver, you are involved in every stage of your injured family member's rehabilitation, recovery and new life. As the intimate partner who is also a Caregiver, issues related to intimacy and sexual function may arise. Intimacy may decrease as you move from your role as spouse or partner to your role as Caregiver. Healthy intimate relationships are important and could potentially help with the recovery process.

Veterans returning home with major injuries may be anxious about how their spouse or partner will react and how this might change their relationship. The Veteran you are caring for may have physical limitations, medical and/or emotional issues that affect his or her ability to engage in sexual activity. The Veteran may question his or her self-worth, feeling depressed and undesirable. In addition, due to sleep disturbance (for example: insomnia, waking up frequently, nightmares, medical equipment), many couples choose to sleep in separate beds (and rooms). This may also contribute to more feelings of emotional separation, making it even harder to resume a healthy intimate relationship.

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It is important to understand that it may be harder to talk to your Veteran due to changes in his or her behavior or communication style. A severe injury, and readjustment to civilian life, can make talking about a sensitive subject like sex and intimacy even more difficult. For Caregivers, lack of communication about sex and intimacy between you, your spouse/partner and health care professionals can be a major issue. While talking about the problem can be difficult, it is the first and most important step in recovering intimacy.

As the partner and Caregiver for an injured Veteran, you might also experience new difficulties with intimacy. This might include feeling worried that your Veteran partner is no longer emotionally or physically attracted to you, because he or she seems emotionally unavailable or shows a decreased interest in physical intimacy and sexual activity. At times, you may experience your own feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, discouragement and loss when the Veteran you care for experiences physical, mental and emotional changes related to their injury and readjustment. These reactions are normal but can be challenging to deal with on your own. Consider seeking help by confiding in a friend, participating in a support group or consulting a professional mental health provider.

Caregiving Tips

1. Educate yourself. Understanding the Veteran's injury and the related physical and emotional symptoms will help you and the Veteran you care for cope with and manage any changes in intimacy.
2. Pay attention to warning signs of depression. If you or your loved one begin displaying signs of depression, take action. If anyone talks about suicide, take it seriously and seek help immediately. Veteran Crisis Line (1-800-273-TALK [8255])
3. Be open to a new definition of intimacy, including when and how you and your partner are intimate.
4. If you decline a request for sexual intimacy from your spouse/partner, try to offer an alternative such as a shared activity or simply cuddling.
5. Talk about your feelings, hopes and desires with your partner when you're both calm and ready to listen.
6. Find a trusted counselor, support group or friend to discuss your worries and concerns. The change in intimacy can be stressful and confusing. Talking it out can help you find the right perspective for you.
7. Don't forget to pay attention to your own needs. It is important for your health and the health of the Veteran that you take some time off from caregiving.
8. Find ways to be close that do not involve sex, such as shared activities like cooking, yoga or massage.
9. Spend quality time together.
10. Respect your partner's need for space.
11. Schedule intimate time.



I have more questions. Where can I go for help?

VA knows that being a Caregiver can be both rewarding and challenging. You can always find more information at www.caregiver.va.gov, including contact information for the VA Caregiver Support Coordinator near you.

You can also call VA's Caregiver Support Line
toll-free at 1-855-260-3274.

The Caregiver Support Line is open
Monday through Friday, 8:00 am – 11:00 pm ET,
and Saturday, 10:30 am – 6:00 pm ET.

Call to talk to caring professionals who can:

- Tell you about assistance available from VA.
- Help you access services and benefits.
- Connect you with your local Caregiver Support Coordinator at a VA Medical Center near you.
- Just listen, if that's what you need right now.