



Intimacy and Sexual Health Following Illness or Injury



Service members and their loved ones may face several challenges following an illness or injury. One such challenge that is often not discussed is difficulty with emotional or sexual intimacy. Let’s face it, sexual health and intimacy can be difficult to discuss at any time, in any relationship. Illness or injury may pose additional challenges, such as those noted below. This resource may serve as a conversation starter for you and your loved one.

Emotional or physical intimacy challenges that injured or ill service members may experience include physical limitations, pain, changes in sexual thoughts and behaviors due to brain injury, and insecurities regarding their self-image. Loved ones may be confused or upset by the changes in the attitudes and behaviors of the service member, concerned that they will cause their partner physical pain during sexual activities, or have difficulty connecting to them on an intimate level if they are also acting as their primary caregiver. Below are some tips for dealing with these various concerns.

Tips	Strategies
Set aside time to reconnect	This could be a date night out of the house, dinner with no television or phones, or an activity you both enjoy.
Focus on sex as an activity that brings mutual enjoyment and satisfaction	Sex does not have to be about erection and orgasm. Find out what else your partner enjoys.
Be open to new ideas and trying new things	Try pillows or other adaptive devices to help you with positions that are difficult or cause pain
Focus on the non-sexual aspects of intimacy as well	Take time to focus on your common interests, friendship, mutual goals and love for each other.
Talk openly	Learn what activities cause the injured person pain and what their concerns are regarding intimacy.
Perform flexibility and range of motion exercises prior to sex	This can help make many positions more comfortable.
Time sexual activity around periods of less pain	This could be first thing in the morning, after the muscles and joints have been loosened up or after a dose of pain medication.
Experiment with new positions that may be more comfortable for the injured member	An occupational or physical therapist may be able to assist with ideas.
If possible, hire someone else to provide care periodically so you and your partner can focus on intimacy	This can be helpful even if it is only once a week in preparation for date night.
Learn more about traumatic brain injury (TBI)	Talk to a healthcare provider or use the resources in this document to learn how TBI affects behavior to help avoid misunderstanding or misinterpreting new behaviors.



Resources

Military OneSource

Information is available for all relationship stages and life situations, including access to counseling and other resources.

<http://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness>

1-800-342-9647

Courage to Care, Courage to Talk

A website which provides information, resources and tips for those with war injuries including how to talk to your family, friends and healthcare providers about sensitive topics.

<http://www.couragetotalk.org/index.php>

BrainLine Military

BrainLine Military provides military-specific information and resources on traumatic brain injury (TBI) for service members (active duty and reserves), veterans and families including articles and videos about how to effectively talk and communicate with someone who has experienced a TBI.

<http://www.brainlinemilitary.org/>

Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (MSKTC)

MSKTC is a national center that works to put research into practice to serve the needs of people with spinal cord injuries (SCI), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and burn injuries. Included in their numerous resources are fact sheets regarding sexuality after a TBI.

<http://www.msktc.org/>