AMERICAN PARKINSON DISEASE ASSOCIATION
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Parkinson's Disease: Communication and Intimacy

For many couples, maintaining intimacy requires open communication and ongoing engagement. When one or both people have Parkinson's disease (PD), unanticipated changes in the couple's physical, emotional, and sexual interactions may present additional hurdles. But by broadening their view of intimacy and collaborating with healthcare professionals, couples can maintain and even improve their intimate connection, even while living with PD.

How PD Can Affect Intimacy and Sexuality

To maintain an intimate connection, it is important to understand the scope of the changes brought about by PD that can affect a couple's relationship.

The motor symptoms of PD—slowed movements, tremor, and stiffness—can interfere with lovemaking, and reduced facial expression can make nonverbal communication difficult. Men may have difficulty achieving or maintaining an erection, or achieving orgasm, while women may have vaginal dryness or pain, and orgasm may be difficult as well. Medication side effects may reduce or increase desire, which can create an imbalance in desire for a couple and add stress to a sexual relationship.

Beyond these physical effects, when one person takes on the role of care partner, it can affect the ability of both partners to maintain their sexual desire. One or both partners may feel more tired and may experience depression or grief related to the illness or the prospect of an altered future. All of these factors can make it more difficult to nurture an open, intimate sexual relationship.

Communication is the Key to a Fulfilling Intimate Relationship

Good communication is essential in any relationship, and even more so when living with PD. It is important for couples to talk openly about their sexual relationship and their needs for emotional intimacy, yet many have never had the opportunity—or felt the need—to practice this before. By developing communication skills, couples will be better able to adapt to the changes that PD brings, and other sexual changes that happen as we age. Sharing feelings and concerns with your partner—being willing to be vulnerable and being open to and supportive of your partner's vulnerability—strengthens closeness and reinforces your commitment to one another.

Key parts of successful communication with your partner include:

- **Be positive:** Rather than only telling your partner you are unhappy with your level of physical connection, try telling him or her, "Let's talk about ways we can be more physically close."
- **Offer ideas**, rather than blame or criticism, perhaps saying, "Can we try this?"
- **Be brave!** Embrace talking about the difficult topics; your partner will probably be grateful you brought them up, even if they are uncomfortable at first.
- **Seek help** from a professional if you need it.

Open Up to New Ideas of Sexual Intimacy and Pleasure

Perhaps the most important advice, beyond developing good communication skills, is to open yourself up to new ideas about what sexual intimacy entails and what can be pleasurable. When sex is thought of as a "buffet," it can become full of interesting and nourishing possibilities beyond the standard fare you may have become used to. By expanding your definition of "sex" and letting it evolve to fit you and your partner, you can remain intimate even as PD changes things.

There are many ways of being intimate. Focusing on pleasurable touch and emotional connection can make sex rewarding regardless of any physical limitations. Find the activities you and your partner enjoy, which may be different from what you are used to.

There are practical steps couples can take to help them cope with PD-related challenges and maintain physical connection. Make physical intimacy a priority. Look for ways to include it in your day and adjust your routines to make it more likely. Establish a "bridging time" for yourself if you need it before sex, during which you relax, get in touch with your body, and connect with your own sexual energy. Time your medications to fit with your intended time for sex. Be in positions that are comfortable and try new positions or use pillows for support. Be open to trying new things. Sex should be fun and meaningful, and with care and attention, it can continue to be, despite the challenges of PD.

Get the Help You Need

Talk to your doctor about your sexual concerns. Your doctor may not raise the topic of sexuality, but they can likely offer guidance and support for coping with PD-related challenges. You might try asking your doctor, "Can I talk to you about the changes in our sexual life, or my sexual experience?" or "What are the sexual side effects of the medications I am on?" Medications given for PD symptoms may affect sexuality. Some may cause hypersexuality and some may reduce desire; adjusting medications can often help. You may be experiencing depression, which can reduce sexual desire. Depression should be treated for many reasons, including its effect on libido.

Finding a Therapist

A sex therapist or sexologist, or a clinical social worker, is trained in helping couples improve their sexual and intimate relationships. If there are no professionals in your area, virtual visits may allow you to meet with someone from the comfort of your home. For more information, you can visit the following websites:

- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists, **aasect.org**
- The American Board of Sexology, **americanboardofsexology.org**

Recommended Resources

- *Naked at Our Age: Talking Out Loud About Senior Sex*, by Joan Price. 2011, Seal Press
- *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: For All of Us Who Live with Disabilities, Chronic Pain, and Illness*, 2nd edition, by Miriam Kauffman. 2007, Cleis Press
- *Parkinson's Diva: A Woman's Guide to Parkinson's Disease*, by Maria De León. 2015, thewordverve Inc
- *ParkinSex: A Guide to Intimacy*
  Need help with intimacy? APDA's ParkinSex initiative was designed to empower those who have allowed intimacy to fade and inspire those who are looking for new ideas.

  Read the eBook, watch the video, and get your ParkinSex kit delivered to your home.
  apdaparkinson.org/parkinsex

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