

TITLE: 'It's a Shared Experience': Navigating Sexual Health in Cancer Survivorship from a Dyadic Perspective

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STUDENT SUBMISSION: Yes

TOPIC/TARGET AUDIENCE: Cancer-related health specialists; cancer survivors

ABSTRACT: Background: Young adult (YA) breast cancer survivors experience myriad and persistent sexual health difficulties following treatment. Strategies for managing these difficulties often focus on individual cancer survivors, but couples navigate life after cancer as a dyad. Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how couples manage their sexual health following breast cancer. Methods: We conducted individual, concurrent telephone interviews with 25 YA female breast cancer survivors and their male partners. We utilized a thematic, inductive analysis to examine data from individual interviews, followed by analysis within- and across-couples to identify dyadic themes. Results: Couples articulated physical (e.g., painful sex, decreased libido) and psychological (e.g., guilt, self-consciousness) challenges to their sexual health in survivorship. Gender differences emerged, where women more often described a sense of 'duty' to engage sexually than men. Couples described a shift in roles throughout survivorship that either strengthened relationships or created a 'wedge.' Couples identified 'open communication' and strategies for 'working as a team' as critical in order to navigate these challenges, but perceived a need for more support and resources. Conclusions: Couples manage complex sexual health difficulties after cancer. Study results can inform strategies to improve this experience for survivors and their partners.

OBJECTIVE(S): Describe YA breast cancer survivors' and their partners' communication and shared experience following cancer.
