

Sex and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for People with ABI and Couples

ABI can affect people's sexual functioning in many different ways. Sexual difficulties related to ABI can include:

- Reduced sexual drive
- Increased sexual drive
- Difficulty with the way sexual organs respond to sexual stimulation
- Difficulty regulating when and what sexual behaviour is appropriate
- Struggling to feel sexually attractive following the injury
- Difficulty for a couple moving from a carer and care recipient based relationship to being sexual partners
- Difficulty finding a sexual partner following the injury

There are many factors which impact a person's experience of sexuality following ABI. These include the specific damage caused to the brain by the ABI, the sexual behaviour in which they participated prior to the injury, the existence of a sexual partner, the person's age, the physical and cognitive disabilities associated with the ABI and the person's wishes regarding their sex life.

If you are experiencing difficulty related to your sex life following ABI:

- Be proactive about raising your concerns with any involved therapists. They will most likely have helpful advice, but may be reticent to raise topics relating to sex.
- Discuss your concerns with your partner. Have a frank conversation about what sexual behaviour you each find enjoyable and stimulating and what you can do as a couple to enjoy sex together. Listen carefully to what each of you enjoy and be open to doing things differently. For example, if a partner with an ABI has difficulties becoming sexually aroused, they might find it helpful to have an extended massage as part of the sexual encounter. It is also important to discuss the behaviours that may turn each of you off sex.
- As well as discussing sex with your partner, have a discussion about what needs to happen for each of you to feel loved and respected

by each other. Make sure you are doing other enjoyable things together that you both enjoy.

- If one partner is much more interested in sex than the other, be open to the partner with a higher sex drive masturbating alone.
- If you are having difficulties feeling sexually attractive after your injury, plan to do things that make you feel attractive and good about yourself.
- Many partners of those with ABI talk about the difficulty transitioning from being a carer to a lover. It can be helpful to have a ritual around sex that distinguishes time together as sexual partners from time where you are carer and care recipient.
- Some couples find that sex is not part of their lives after ABI. It may be that neither partner is interested in resuming a sex life which is fine if the feeling is mutual. Some couples decide to sleep separately after ABI, as they find it more comfortable due to their changed relationship. This may be a positive step in establishing their different but workable relationship after ABI.
- It is also important to distinguish the desire for a sexual partner from longing for company and companionship. If a person is feeling the need for a sexual partner, they may also benefit from establishing stronger friendships and generally establishing more social connections.

This information sheet has been prepared by Life Supports Counselling Service. Life Supports Counselling Service provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on **1300 73 50 30**.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see www.lifesupports.com.au/acquired_brain_injury.htm