Maintaining a Healthy Sex Life With RA

by MARIAH LEACH

Rheumatoid Arthritis and Intimacy Despite Pain and Fatigue

Most adults would be likely to agree that physical intimacy is an important element of a relationship. However, for those living with the complications of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), pain and fatigue can sometimes present major hurdles to maintaining intimacy.

If this has been an issue in your own relationship, here are some important things to keep in mind!

Understand That You Aren't Alone or Unusual

It's not at all unusual for chronic pain and fatigue to have a negative impact on a patient's sex life.

In fact, the results of a study presented at the 2016 European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR) Annual Congress showed that sexual dysfunction is present in more than one-third of patients with rheumatoid arthritis — both men and women.

A satisfactory sexual life can be an important part of a person's quality of life and self-identity, so you should never feel embarrassed for wanting to improve this aspect of your life.

Seek Help From a Doctor or Therapist

While it may feel rather uncomfortable to bring up the topic of intimacy, medical professionals can be great resources in figuring out how to address intimacy issues.

Your doctor can work with you to identify potential solutions for pain and fatigue — including medications, physical therapy, appropriate exercise, and nutrition. It's also important to speak to your doctor if you think one of the medications you are taking for your rheumatoid arthritis may be having a negative sexual side effect.

If you find yourself struggling with the emotional impact of these issues, it may also be very helpful to speak with a therapist. Though intimacy is an important quality of life issue, if you don't bring up the topic your doctor may never ask about it — so try not to feel self-conscious.

Communicate Honestly With Your Partner

Open and honest communication with your partner is critical to sustaining a healthy sex life, particularly if pain and fatigue present additional obstacles on your path to intimacy.

Having a discussion about intimacy can be challenging, so it may help to initiate the conversation in a neutral setting while you are both fully clothed, rather than when you are already in bed together. Once you identify the issues and some potential solutions to try, it's a good idea to try to keep the lines of communication open during

sexual activity too.

If you find it difficult to speak under those circumstances, it may help to develop a signal in advance so you tell your partner what is working for you and what isn't. Ultimately, open communication will help eliminate guesswork and can actually improve intimacy in a partnership.

Plan Ahead

If you are dealing with pain and fatigue, it can be useful to prepare in advance for sex. To work around pain, take your RA medications or muscle relaxants about an hour before an encounter with your partner.

Some gentle stretches may help improve your range of motion. A warm bath or shower may help decrease your pain levels, and could even include your partner as part of your foreplay.

To work around fatigue, it may be useful to arrange your schedule so you won't be overly tired from other activities. While not everyone may like the idea of scheduling sex, it can be a good starting place to help you and your partner commit to connecting in the bedroom.

Remember That Sex Is Not Just Intercourse

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, pain or fatigue may still make it difficult for you to contemplate participating fully in intercourse. If this is the case, it's important to remember that there are many other ways that you and your partner can find pleasure and satisfaction with each other.

Intimacy can also include: kissing, touching, sensual massage, cuddling, fantasizing together, or even simple synchronized breathing. You can also consider incorporating some assistive tools like over-the-counter lubrication, support pillows, or toys.

If you and your partner are creative and maintain your senses of humor, you can find lots of ways to maintain intimacy despite pain and fatigue.