

## **CHANGES IN BODY IMAGE**

In April 2003 I was asked to present at the UOCA National Conference in Saskatoon. My Presentation was to be "Coping with Changes in Body Image". In my job as a psychotherapist I have over the past thirty years worked a lot with people who experience major life changes and tragedies. These have included everything from cancer diagnosis to death and depression and marital break up. I have received many referrals to treat folks struggling with sexual and body issues. This was, however, the first time that I had been asked to explore the issues of sexuality and body image changes as it relates to people with ostomies.

It is impossible to understand what kind of effect an ostomy might have on a person without considering the culture that he/she comes from. For it is within the context of our culture that we make meaning. Our reaction to, and ability to cope with the challenges and tragedies that living dictates, depends on the meaning we make. North American culture, for example, teaches us that our value lies in what we produce and/or in how we look, and not that of our value is inherent in our existence. So if we are faced with something like an ostomy, we will often experience a crisis of self-worth. HERE the focus is on how one's body looks rather than who one is as a person.

Another important cultural factor is that we have been taught to hide and feel embarrassment about perfectly normal, natural and essential bodily functions. We will face questions such as, "What good am I now? Am I still desirable or attractive? Who would want me like this or how long will it take for them to reject me (*as I may be rejecting myself now*)"? The important realisation is that one can decide to reject the societal teachings as an alternative to rejecting the self. For some, the body is a place where we experience all taboos and shame, a place where we experience wounding and trauma. For others, the body is a place of freedom, creativity, playfulness and desire. It can also be a place of healing, and a place to make love connections with self and other.

When I was preparing this workshop, I started by searching the Internet for information on ostomies and sex, or ostomies and body image. I found articles that I thought were very good however, missed the real issue. They asked the reader to explore the relationship they have with their body, and what their attitude towards their body was and is now. Other authors would suggest ways to hide or disguise ostomies as a way of minimizing the effect it would have on a partner or on one's own self-consciousness, for example placing a lace cover over the ostomy bag. These are not bad suggestions and might be successfully incorporated into sexual encounters for some. They won't, however, work in terms of dealing with someone's self image problems.

This is because they focus on the ostomy and the body and not on the eroticism or the value of the person.

The idea behind such suggestions is to help people hide their bodily functions as much as possible to reduce anxiety and self-consciousness. It is, I believe, much more useful to learn to tolerate the anxiety one has, to master our discomfort and be fully aware of whom you are in relationships. The truth we all live with, is "the world is not safe". If one is going to have satisfying relationships, one has to be willing to take risks. People will have to be willing to expose themselves and deal with the consequences, both positive and negative. He or she needs to trust self first. Each person needs to know that they can deal competently with whatever they have to, and will not abandon or reject "*self*", even if abandoned or rejected by others, even if it is by someone they love.

We don't always control what happens to us, we don't get to choose how or when we get sick or have an accident. We do, however, have the ability to influence how we are affected by what befalls us. We can choose the attitude we have towards life. We get to decide if we will spend our energy being angry and bitter, or whether we will accept the world the way it is and live our lives with as much energy and passion as possible. That includes of course how we will be sexually. We need to remember that altered sexual function does not destroy sexuality. You are not your disability your disability is a condition that you have to live with. Our focus needs to be on your relationship with our partner, or with our body and not on intercourse, or on how you don't look the same as you used to, or how others look, or what they might be thinking of you. I remember a quote I read years ago that went something like this.

*"When I was twenty I worried about what people thought of me, when I was forty I didn't care what they thought of me and now that I'm sixty I realise they haven't been really thinking of me at all."*

We are all erotic and eroticism is much bigger than the act of sex. If we are to fully experience our erotic potential, we need to transcend our cultural training and master our own discomfort and stress. Sexual techniques don't work. One must deal with mind and intuition.

Having said all this, it is important to remember to honour the process of grief that one inevitably goes through when experiencing a change in, or loss of body function. Furthermore, this process can take one to two years. One cannot avoid this. We do, however, get to decide whether we stay stuck in our grief process or take an active role in creating the best possible life one can. Remember eroticism is much more about attitude and energy than it is about the body.

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