

Masculinity

Masculinity refers to the qualities or attributes considered to be characteristic of being a man. These can include strength, virility, self-reliance, independence, dominance, stoicism and sexual interest & prowess. Masculinity can be influenced by religion, culture, societal beliefs and life experiences, including the journey with prostate cancer. The consequences of a prostate cancer diagnosis and the side effects of the treatment that follows can have significant impact on body image, sexuality and self-concept; all of which are intertwined with masculinity.

Even in the absence of prostate cancer, men can struggle with the expectations, standards and roles of what it means to be a sexual male. There is extreme pressure to be “masculine” in our society. Even when everything is optimal, it is rare that a man can live up to these standards and expectations. While managing the side effects associated with prostate cancer, it is necessary to understand how this idea of masculinity has impacted you, in order to reach a level of acceptance where you feel comfortable with the choices you will be making around your sexual life and sexuality - this can help support your masculinity.

First, it is important to recognize what feelings are being experienced and why. For some men, they might experience various levels of depression, anger, frustration, fear, anxiety and/or embarrassment, which can lead to avoidance behaviors when it comes to intimacy, including sex. This, paired with the fact men are “not supposed” to talk about their emotions, puts further burden on the relationship which is already strained with the interruptions that prostate cancer can have on family, work and life in general.

It is understandable to be afraid of a prostate cancer diagnosis and the potential side effects, including how they might affect your relationships.

A prostate cancer diagnosis may be the first major health event in your life which can threaten your foundation. When it comes to masculinity, there is a component of control and a prostate cancer diagnosis can create a feeling of losing control.

Fear about losing one's masculinity is a real concern. It is important to define what 'masculinity' means to you. Does it relate to sexual function, societal roles (partner, bread winner, father), or is it more about how one feels emotionally?

This is where a prostate cancer diagnosis can create the opportunity to really understand what you value around your body image, sexual self-view and masculinity. It is important to remember that even with changes to sexual function, you are still a sexual person and still a masculine man.

Dealing with Prostate Cancer and Masculinity Issues

One way to cope with your diagnosis is to become informed. Whether you have a prostatectomy, radiation, androgen deprivation therapy, chemotherapy or other treatment, it is important to understand the process, procedures, risks, benefits, and general statistics associated with the treatment. Knowledge is power and power provides a sense of comfort and control.

If you're concerned about sexual function after prostate cancer treatment, it is important to learn all you can about the different treatment options. Each treatment has different side effects and may affect sexual function in different ways.

You might find it helpful to focus on other aspects of your sexual activity, other than intercourse. This can help reduce the pressures of sexual performance, alter expectations around sexual sensations and response, and embrace the prospect to experience new opportunities around sexual activity, expression and appreciation. There is no doubt the sexual adaptation process can be challenging and frustrating, but for many men and

couples there can be successful adaptation, especially when the principles of acceptance, flexibility, patience and persistence are implemented.

If you are having challenges with your sexual life the following may be helpful.

- Discover strategies around talking about sexual issues with your partner. Talking with your partner is important and will become easier over time. We have developed a set of guidelines for discussion, which are available upon request. If you are not comfortable with talking, you can try writing a letter sharing your thoughts around the sexual changes you have experienced since prostate cancer treatment. This can include how it has affected your sexual function, sexual confidence, masculinity and the dynamics of your sexual relationship together. You could also share what you would like to do in your sexual relationship and what would help to support this aspect of your life together.
- Sometimes talking to others is also beneficial. You can join a support group to share thoughts around living with prostate cancer. Men with prostate cancer may feel better and focus less on concerns about masculinity when they see other men coping with the same situation that they're in and can hear about others' experiences.
- Counselors and sex/relationship therapists are an asset, as they help facilitate understanding, identify strategies and help the individual or couple maneuver through the various challenges. This can benefit a couple's sexual life by restoring sexual confidence, positive sexual self-view and sense of masculinity.
- Practicing mindfulness can also help with fostering intimacy and masculinity. This practice focuses on your ability to be aware of your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and actions in the present moment, without judging yourself or your experience. It is proven that mindfulness can help reduce stress and anxiety. When men feel as though they are losing their masculinity, they may shut out the ones they love. Mindfulness can help alter your negative thought processes and maintain a positive sexual self-view.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy is also very beneficial for managing stress. This can be helpful when you are re-evaluating your beliefs and values associated with your sexual self-view, sexuality and masculinity.

Other activities that can help boost your masculinity include:

- Participating in “manly” habits and hobbies such as hiking, exercise classes, weight lifting or dragon boating; all of which breed a sense of masculine camaraderie and connects you to your natural strength and independence.
- Take care of your body. Without taking care of the basic needs, you cannot reliably improve yourself, feed your masculine energy, or maintain relationships with other people. Eat good food, get enough sleep, and exercise almost every day. This will give you energy and boost your mood.
- Recognize, acknowledge and embrace the positive qualities and attributes you have, or have developed, as you navigate your prostate cancer journey. Remember YOU are the best gift you can give someone.

Video on Masculinity after prostate cancer: Bruce's Story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5Dde6yyjBM>