

ELEPHANTS DO BITE

“We haven’t made love in the 11 years since I was treated for prostate cancer,” said the man to the group sitting in a circle discussing their sexuality issues. Impotence and some stress incontinence embarrassed him the first time his wife approached him after treatment, and they never tried again. They also never discuss it.

Another person in the group said “We had the same problem. It was like we had a big thing between us and it was weighing us down. It was worse when we went into the bedroom. We tried to avoid being undressed in front of each other. We had to be careful not to say anything that would make either one of us think about sex. It was as if there was an elephant in the bedroom. We tried to ignore it. But it didn’t work. Bedroom meant loving and sex. Going into the bedroom meant that elephant would be there reminding us that no matter what we did during the day, we had to come to terms on how to deal with sex and intimacy. Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer. I told him we must work on the problem. I love him too much to live without affection or loving.”

Many prostate cancer couples have the Elephant Syndrome – they don’t talk about sex, but it is very much on their mind. Their “fixes” range from the Utah wife who won’t let her husband touch her because he “can’t follow through” to a “husband who regularly has a headache.” Then there is the couple who sleeps in separate rooms so they “can get a better night’s sleep.” The stories are many but the effect is the same: the absence of physical affection separates the couple.

So often partners reflect regret, frustration, and resignation when they discuss their situation. Their resignation is especially sad because coming together to find a way to deal with the problem is as close as both partners deciding let us try some things to get what each of us needs and wants. The more partners tell us of their success at reviving their intimacy, the solution is repeated. In these cases, one partner took the initiative to talk about his or her feelings. Sometimes the other partner listened. Sometimes, the other partner resisted. Sometimes the other partner was expressive “I don’t want to talk about it.” A variety of partner reactions. Many ways to handle them. But, in the end, the successful couples got through it. They came to realize that even with erectile dysfunction, both partners can get satisfied. Perhaps not in the ways they might have in the past but each one can get the pleasure and affection he or she would like.

So the successful couples have found ways to get rid of the elephant in the bedroom. They were able to revive their sexual connection. Their first step was to talk. One woman decided to use our book by reading it to her husband while he was on the treadmill. Since he was committed to the treadmill, he had to listen. She had his “undivided attention.” On different points, she would ask him what do you think? Gradually he started telling her his feelings. That led to what he would like. And he would ask her “how do you feel about that?”

From that point they went on to touching. Another couple started with the woman saying “You know we don’t have to try to have sex if you’re worried about coming up. But how about still holding me occasionally. Do we have to give that up also because of the erection problem?” She told him that when he touched her and held her she got a “natural high”, the kind that runners get after many miles of effort. And couples can get it

with a good hug. That couple found that once they got rid of the contact barrier, they went on to kissing. And as the saying goes, one good thing led to another.

For other couples, touching means starting to hold hands again. Some do it having agreed that they are not touching with the expectation that it will lead to sex. Some do it as starting to walk down the road to greater physical contact. From hands, they may go into touching sessions. They would alternate during the same session or do it at different times. While they did this, they would tell each other how they felt – what felt good and what didn't.

If you're looking for a way to begin, the first step is to talk and then touch. Then talk some more and touch some more. The characteristics that make each couple different also means that what works for one person or one couple will not necessarily work exactly the same for another. But as in any activity, commitment is necessary to get something to happen. A lot of adages apply. But we think that if reviving your sex life is what you want, maybe you need to give each other a "let's get started" hug. Hugs are commonplace for greeting people close ones and others. Let's think of our partner as one of this group.

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Please send your questions and comments to: info@thelovinaintover.org