



'I LOST MY  
SEXUAL  
IDENTITY  
TO CANCER'

Finding the courage and the confidence to be intimate again after cancer is a complex process. Here, Fay Field explains how she is learning to reconnect with her sexual self

*'I'm a new version of myself,' says Fay*

I was 18 when I met my husband, Steve. He was 19, and we were both employed at our local shopping centre – he worked downstairs, I worked upstairs. When our eyes first met across rails of clothing, I remember thinking, 'He's beautiful.' Six months later, he plucked up the courage to ask me out. We shared similar values and a silly humour that no one but us found funny. Little did I know back then that the giddy rush of first love would lead to a lifetime together.

When you're with someone from a young age, you grow together. Your connection forms and deepens with time. You learn what makes the other tick, what makes them happy – and what you want, too. Infatuation turned to deeper, committed love. We learned the ropes of adulthood together, and I always felt comfortable with him. He made me feel good about myself, too; I felt more attractive being with him.

We got married when I was 23. Our relationship was natural and easy, our sex life fulfilling. Life was simple. We were happy. But then, in April 2018, I found a large lump in my left breast. And just like that, our sense of normality was shattered.

I knew it was breast cancer even before medical professionals told me the news; I had this lingering sense of dread. The lump, which I hadn't noticed the last time I self-checked, was bigger than a golf ball, my nipple had inverted and I felt flushed and hot. Later that day, I called all my family to our house to tell them the news. The shock was intense. It didn't feel real.

Treatment was swift and brutal. I was 29 and wanted to have children in future, so my first hospital trip was for emergency fertility preservation, a condensed course of pre-IVF. For 10 days, I had multiple injections per day into my stomach. I already had cancer in my left breast and the lymph nodes under my arm, and while no one could say whether the hormones would affect my body, the cancer spread to my neck. It was heartbreaking to think that my desire to be a mum might have made things worse.

Six rounds of chemotherapy followed immediately. On the second day, my hair began to fall out. I lost my eyelashes and fingernails, and my skin dried out and cracked. I was nauseous, bloated from steroids, exhausted and in constant pain. I wore make-up to every chemo session: my war paint, a desperate attempt to make myself feel better. But it was impossible to be positive all the time. I felt like I'd lost every ounce of femininity overnight.

We stopped having sex when I was diagnosed with cancer. I became disconnected from my body; I felt like I was damaged, fighting for survival, and couldn't see myself in any other light. I didn't feel confident about the way I looked. I had taken for granted how beautiful my long hair had once been, so watching it come out in clumps was too awful to contemplate; instead, I made the decision to shave it off. Steve, who has had a shaved head since I met him, offered to do it for me. He handled it beautifully, being sensitive while still treating me with fond humour, just as he always had. 'Is it going to upset you if I make a joke?' he asked me early on. In fact, the opposite was true: I felt so thankful to him for not treating me like an invalid.

When the bad days struck, I was completely honest with Steve. It was the best thing I could have done. I told him that I felt anxious that I was no longer the woman he'd signed up for. He was steadfast in his support, but I felt broken and fragile, my body confidence completely diminished. I wondered if I was still enough for him.

I worried about sex a lot. I felt so horrendously ill throughout treatment that I simply couldn't contemplate any kind of intimacy. I was constantly in pain, frightened of being touched in case it hurt. Steve saw every second of the pain I suffered and reassured me that it wouldn't last for ever. He reminded me that I hadn't lost myself, that I'd changed how I looked to survive.

Steve's words meant so much, but they didn't stop my guilt about sex. I felt terrible that my illness meant his needs had become irrelevant. When, falteringly, I explained this, he looked at me and smiled. 'Please don't worry about that,' he said. 'Looking after you, I'm too exhausted myself, most of the time!' He had struck just the right balance, between honesty and kindness, assuring me that there was no pressure. However, a constant niggle remained at the back of my mind. Without that

physical closeness, would we lose each other?

My own needs had changed, too. During the chemo, I continued to sleep in the same bed as Steve. However, the unpredictable side-effects left me needing my own space more than before, and my libido had disappeared. I felt so vulnerable that Steve's presence became essential for feeling safe and calm, but not for feeling sexual at that point. The hot flushes I had were so erratic and



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overwhelming that cuddling was uncomfortable at night. Having Steve there became more about protection than desire.

After chemo, I had a double mastectomy with lymph node extraction and reconstruction, as well as 15 rounds of radiotherapy. Lugging three drains around after the operation and unable to make it up the stairs, I slept on the sofa for three weeks. Steve, meanwhile, was sleeping in our bed on his own. The lack of physical connection was very sad for us both. I missed him and he missed me, and yet I was scared to be too near him. I was petrified of my scars opening during the night.

When the drains were taken out, I fought with everything I had to make it upstairs to our bedroom. I knew Steve would have waited for me for as long as it took, but my stubbornness kicked in – I refused to be a patient for ever. I couldn't cuddle Steve properly, but I could hug him from behind and put my arm around him, or just stroke his hand. The smallest moments of intimacy felt precious and powerful; my love somehow more intense than before.

My body image continues to fluctuate. I've been left with some brutal long-term side effects – scarring, lymphoedema and early menopause. I didn't have the energy to focus on my sexual self throughout treatment and I felt it slip away. Sometimes, it was hard to be lighthearted or to connect to my desire; I lost part of my sexual identity to cancer, and that hurt.

I have huge respect for women who live flat after breast cancer, but for me a reconstruction was a way to help me feel better about my body. It's only now, a year on, that I'm starting to feel like the implants belong to me. I can't actually feel my boobs and I probably never will. The pleasure from being touched was taken away when my boobs were. It's something I'm still trying to process.

I've had to adapt to manage the changes in my body and mind. Gradually, I have learned to recognise what my body has overcome, to view my scars with pride and not fear. They are, after all, a part of my story; physical reminders of the surgery that saved my life.

For me, femininity feels different now. To be sexually attractive, I've learned, is to be strong, to be courageous. I worked really hard to grow my hair back, and my nails are now the longest they've ever been, but the real progress has come from accepting my body's imperfections and viewing my scars with pride and not fear.

## 'I'VE ADAPTED TO CHANGES IN MY BODY AND MIND'

### Reconnecting with your sexual self

*Intimacy doesn't have to mean intercourse. Holding hands, cuddling, kissing and stroking can all help you to slowly get back to feeling closer. Remember, it's okay to not want to be sexual.*

*Allow yourself to grieve. You have experienced major changes to your body and it's quite normal to feel sad, angry, defiant, even disbelieving about what has happened.*

*Express yourself. Talking, writing a journal or starting a blog can all help you to process what has happened and find your way through.*

I am a new version of myself, but I am learning to like that version, too. I saw this in Steve when I came back from a run a few months after treatment. He looked up as I came in, flushed and happy, and I caught the spark of desire in his eyes. I knew, at that moment, that I was emerging from the darkness, becoming a bolder, brighter version of myself.

At one stage, I was worried my libido would never return. I was scared I would be grieving it like a loss for ever, that I may never feel that excitement again. But talking openly, as well as researching other people's experiences on Breast Cancer Care's BECCA app, was a huge help. It was a private way of finding out more, of feeling less alone

when it came to my concerns about sex and breast cancer. It's a tough subject to broach and it was a relief to do some research independently.

It was a year until Steve and I had sex again. 'Shall we?' I said one night, as casually as though I were asking if he wanted to go out for dinner. 'Yeah, okay,' he replied. It was a simple exchange – but a huge milestone.

We had been together for 13 years and married for seven, and yet I still felt very nervous, worried I wouldn't be able to relax. Your libido takes a massive hit from cancer treatment, and I had to reposition my mindset on how I felt about my body to allow myself to enjoy that part of our relationship again. I kept my sports bra on because my boobs are heavy, uncomfortable and sore with lymphoedema. I was worried everything would hurt and, to be honest, it did. However, Steve was so gentle and sweet – it felt like I was losing my virginity again. I actually cried afterwards, a mixture of feeling overwhelmed and relieved.

Sex for us may not be as regular now, but it has become far more special than before. We work with what we have, we support each other and we're always unwaveringly honest. We have overcome something huge and horrible, and we have done it as a team. Steve has seen me at my very worst, my least attractive and my most vulnerable but I have to remind myself that this has intensified our connection.

When I look back at the state I was in this time last year, I was scared I would never be comfortable and confident with intimacy. I'm not the woman I was before. I'm, slowly finding whatever 'normal' is after cancer. For me, this is appreciating any little moment of intimacy; even a cuddle in the kitchen. Like it is for all of us, self-acceptance is a work in progress. It's also being okay with what I see and how I feel. But, ultimately, I am just grateful I am here.