

# Sexual Health After Cancer

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# Ovarian Cancer and SEXUAL HEALTH



**Amy Siston, Ph.D.**

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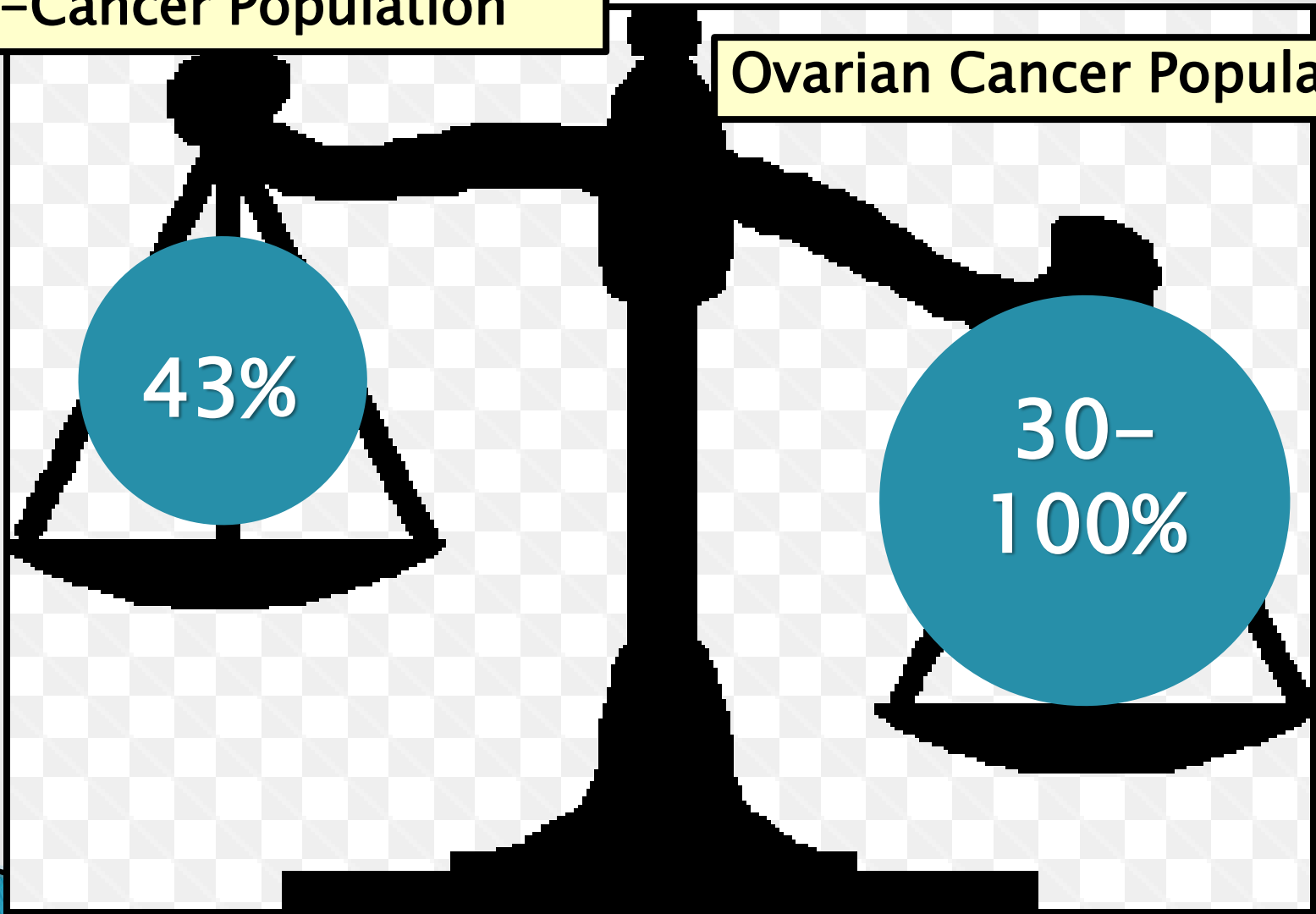
# Prevalence of Sexual Dysfunction

Non-Cancer Population

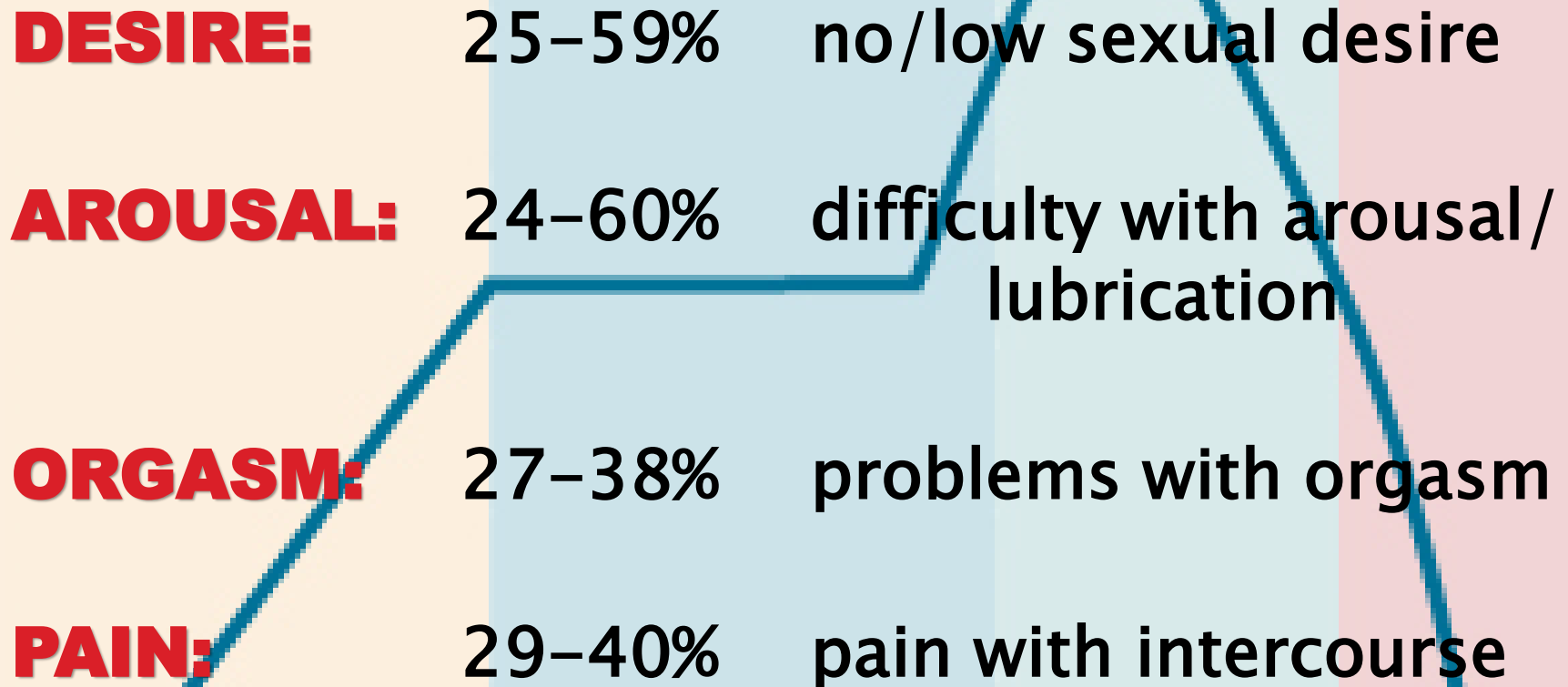
43%

Ovarian Cancer Population

30–  
100%



# Common Sexual Issues



<b>DESIRE:</b>	25–59%	no/low sexual desire
<b>AROUSAL:</b>	24–60%	difficulty with arousal/ lubrication
<b>ORGASM:</b>	27–38%	problems with orgasm
<b>PAIN:</b>	29–40%	pain with intercourse

# Disorders of Desire

**“I’m not interested in sex”**

- ▶ **Medical treatment effects**
  - Abrupt and early menopause
  - Fatigue
  - Nausea
- ▶ **Low sexual self image**
  - Physical attractiveness
  - Self confidence for engaging in sexual activity
- ▶ **Emotional Status**
  - Antidepressant medication

# Disorders of Arousal

**“What’s going on down there?”**

- ▶ **Medical treatment effects**
  - Vaginal dryness
  - Vaginal irritation
  - Vulvovaginal atrophy
  - Insufficient lubrication



**Painful sex**



# Disorders of Orgasm

**“Why can’t I climax anymore?”**

- Medical treatment effects
- Antidepressant medication
- Fatigue
- Emotional components



# Sexual Pain Disorders

**“It hurts!”**

- ▶ Medical treatment effects
  - Scarring or shortening of the vagina
  - Vaginal dryness
  - Emotional component



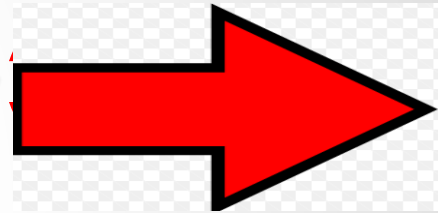


# Why is sex important in cancer care?



- Unlike other areas of function that improve with time post treatment, sexual problems get worse
- 30–50% become sexually inactive post treatment
- Sexual dysfunction post treatment is associated with poor quality of life and depressed mood
- Sex ranks consistently among the top 5 unmet needs of survivors

**What gets in the way**



**Need to  
make quick  
decision...**



# Often more than one person is involved...





**DON'T  
ASK  
DON'T  
TELL**

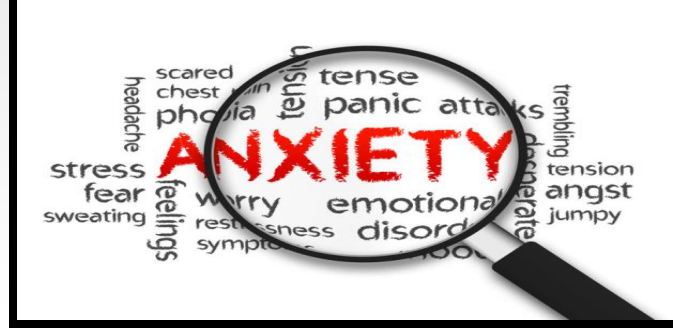


# Unrealistic “SEXPECTATIONS”





# Psychological Distress:



- **Illness provokes distracting worries**
  - Am I healthy enough to engage in sex, to perform?
  - Will I hurt myself?
  - Is sexual activity unhealthy?
- **Sexual encounters become a test**
  - Will it work this time?
- **Pain during sex is a distraction**
  - Elicits fears about one's health
  - Benign or novel sensations during sex can set off chain reaction of anxious thoughts

# Psychological Distress:



## ➤ Depression > in cancer

- Decreased quality of life
- Fatigue
- Change in self esteem
- Medical treatment
- Antidepressants\*

## ➤ Depression ↔ Altered libido

# \*Antidepressants

- ▶ Wellbutrin (Bupropion)– less frequently associated with sexual dysfunction
- ▶ Paxil (Paroxetine)– more frequently association with sexual dysfunction
  - Inhibits sexual desire
  - Inhibits orgasm



# Other Contributing Factors

✓ Changes in body function/structure

✓ Premature menopause

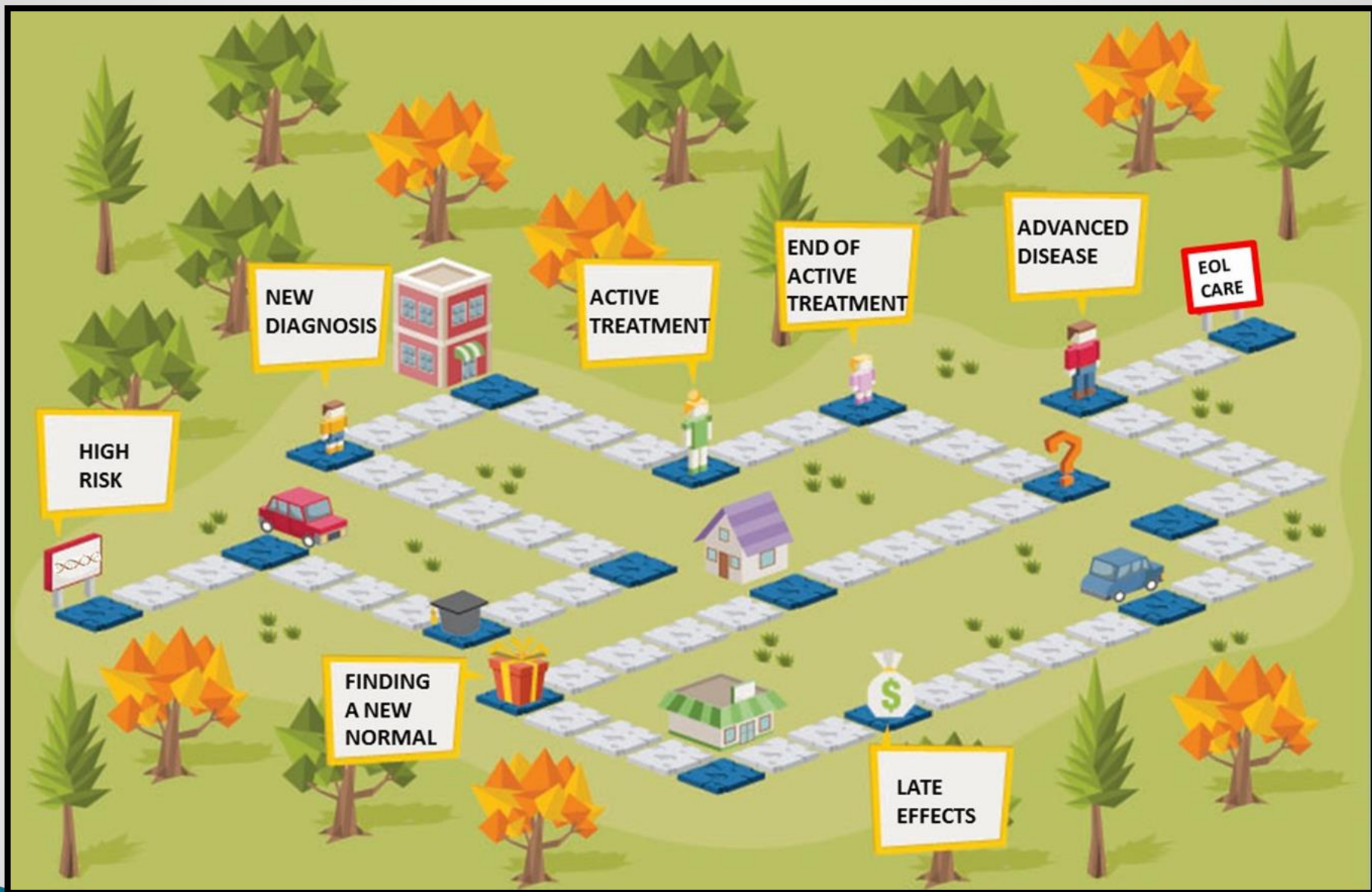
✓ Pain

✓ Changes in body image

✓ Decreased libido

✓ Fatigue









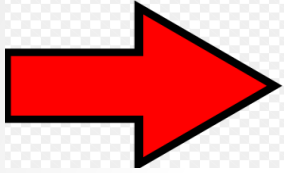


# Treatment of Sexual Problems



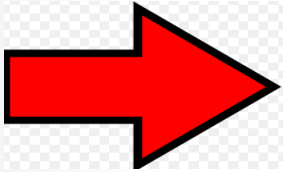
# Maintaining Sexual Health

**S**



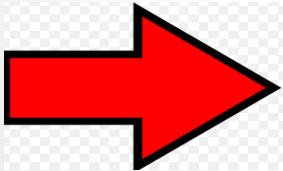
**STRETCH**

**M**



**MOISTURIZE**

**L**



**LUBRICATE**

# S STRETCH

- **Vaginal muscles can either tighten or become too lax with menopause or sexual inactivity**
- **Stretching helps to prevent pain**
- **Kegel exercises**
- **Vaginal dilators**



# **M** **MOISTURIZE**

- **Used routinely, 2-3 times/week**
- **Helps moisturize the vaginal lining**
- **Makes vaginal and surrounding tissue more pliable/ strong**
- **Works for several days**
- **Compatible with condoms**

## **Types**

- **HyaloSyn**
- **Replens**
- **Moist Again**



# **L LUBRICATE**

- **Protects against irritation and dryness**
- **Short acting**
- **To be used immediately before intercourse**

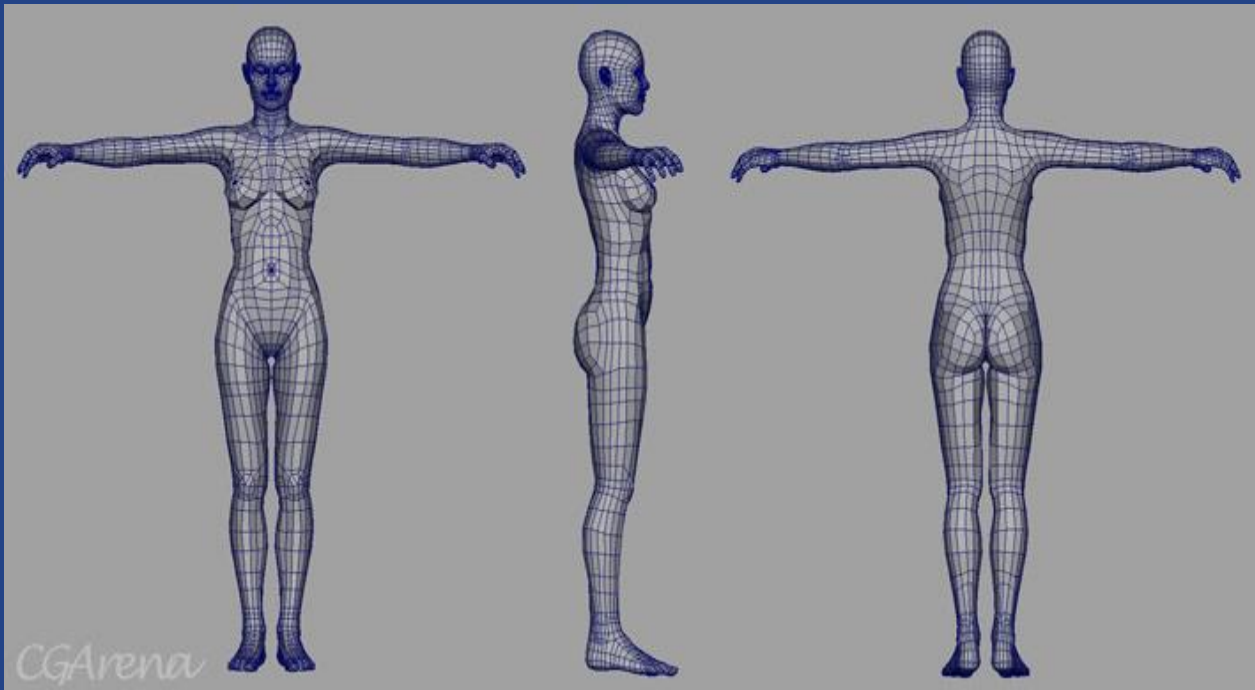
## **Types**

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| ➤ <b>Water-based:</b>    | <b>Slippery Stuff</b>                                     |
| ➤ <b>Silicone-based:</b> | <b>Pink</b>   |
| ➤ <b>Oil-based:</b>      | <b>Olive, Coconut,<br/>Vitamin E &amp; Vegetable Oils</b> |



# Interventions for Sexual Problems

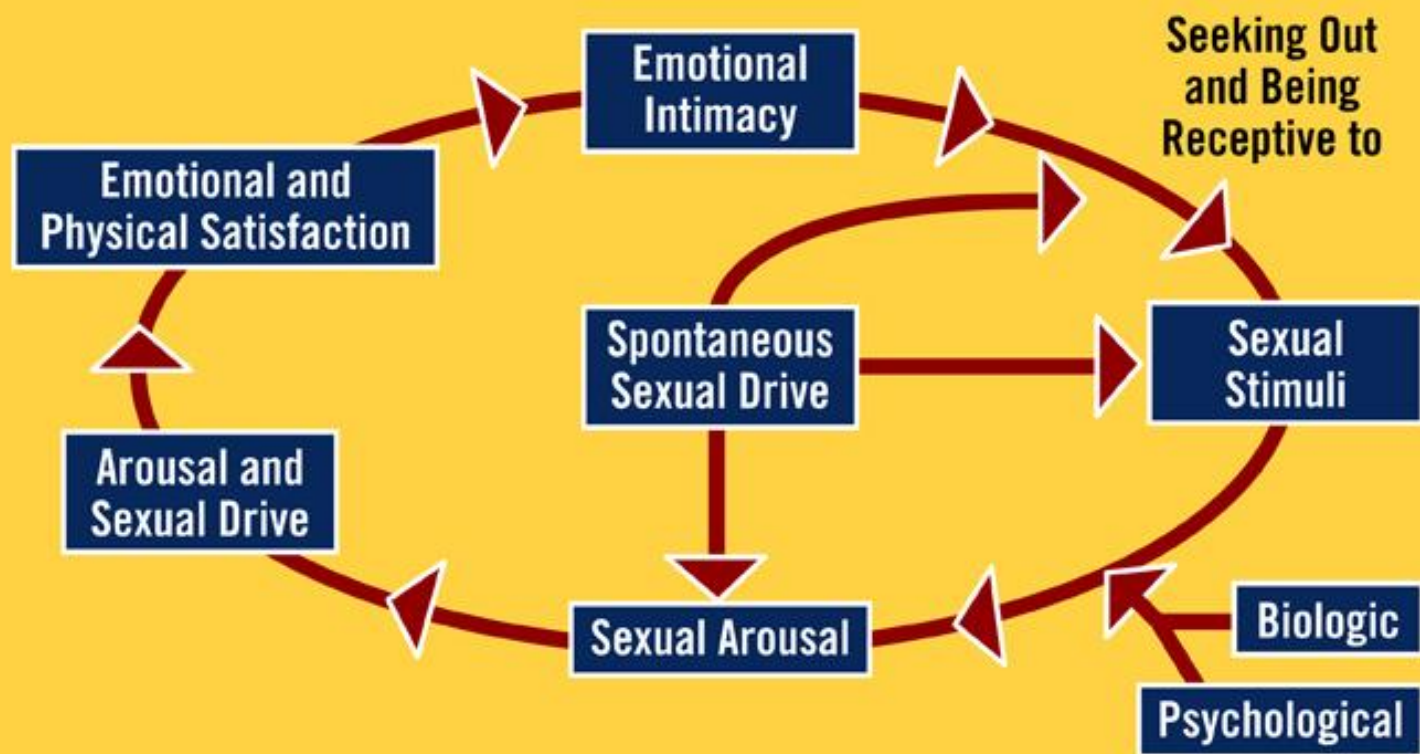
**D  
E  
S  
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R  
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THE  
FEMALE  
BODY  
**BLUEPRINT**

# DESIRE

## Female Sexual Response Cycle



Basson R. *Med Aspects Hum Sex*. 2001;41-42. Basson R. Human sex-response cycles. *J Sex Marital Therapy*. 2001;27:33-43. Adapted with permission.

Kingsberg SA, Knudson G.

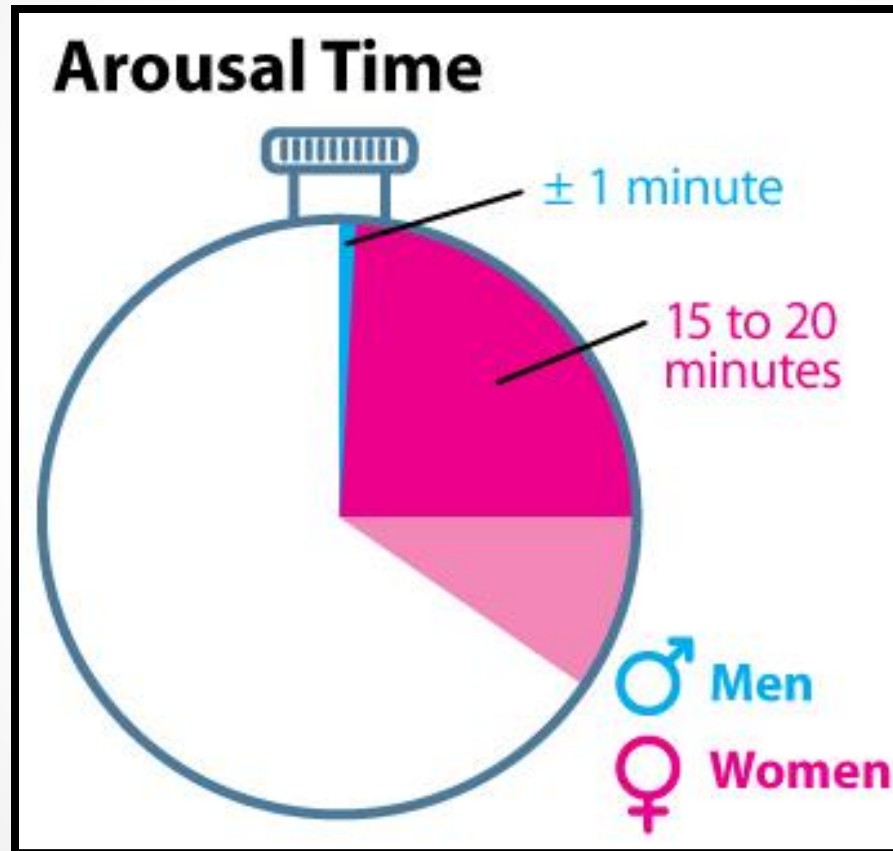
# AROUSAL

Go down a water slide  
without water and  
you'll understand why  
foreplay is so important.



➤ Takes time to achieve satisfactory degree of stimulation before beginning intercourse

**A  
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A  
L**



# **A R O U S A L**

- Use Lubricant
- Avoid intercourse
- EROS: increases blood flow to clitoris and enhances sensation





# Sensate Focus exercises



- Series of homework assignments, practiced 15–30 minutes per exercise
- Couple agrees not to engage in intercourse
- Beginning exercises usually focus on heightened sensory awareness, to **touch, sight, sound and smell**

## **Sample Exercise:**

- Each partner gives the other a massage, clothed. Clients are instructed to enjoy company; not to focus on arousal.
- Each partner gives the other a massage, unclothed. Partner communicates likes/dislikes. Clients are instructed to enjoy company; not to focus on arousal.

**A  
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# ORGASM

- EROS
- Vibrator: pocket rocket



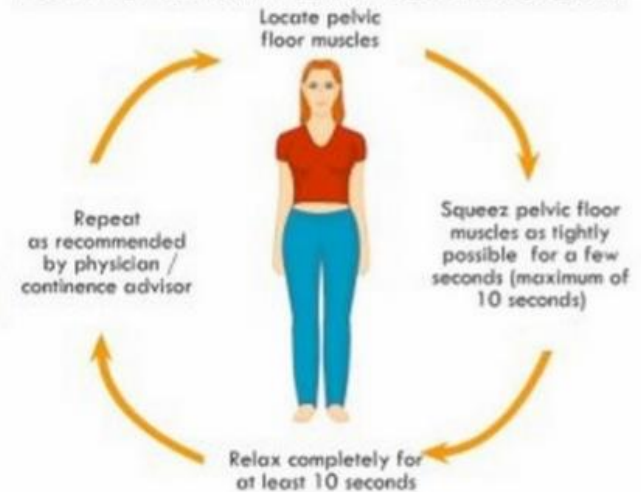
## ➤ Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy (PFPT)



## ➤ Kegel exercises

### Kegels

#### HOW TO PERFORM PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES



# PAIN


- Emotional distress
- PFPT
- Lubricant
- Avoid deep thrusting
- Consider the couple
- Change positions



# **Sex Therapy**

## **Multidisciplinary Care**

- ▶ **Sex therapy is a range of therapeutic processes which may be used to initiate, to restore and to enrich both the sexuality and the sexual components of intimate relationships**
- ▶ **Goal of sex therapy is to help integrate new medical interventions into sexual routine**
  - **Psychosexual education**
  - **Communication about sexual concerns**
  - **Behavioral intervention**
  - **Cognitive restructuring**

A romantic scene of a man and a woman on a beach at sunset. They are standing back-to-back, facing the ocean, and using their arms to form a large heart shape in the air. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark dress, and the man is on the right, wearing a light blue shirt and khaki pants. The background is a warm, golden sunset over the water.

**“The best sex  
happens  
when partners  
can  
communicate  
about  
their needs.”**



# Evaluating Sexual Beliefs

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

### Maladaptive Beliefs

- ▶ There's only one way to have sex
- ▶ I had some good years, it's (sex) over now
- ▶ Nobody is attracted to someone who's sick
- ▶ Sex might make my condition worse...
- ▶ I should just be grateful I'm alive
- ▶ Sex must be spontaneous

### Adaptive Beliefs

- ▶ Sex can still feel good
- ▶ I don't have to have an orgasm to feel satisfied
- ▶ Sex is a part of life no matter how old I am
- ▶ Planning for sex can be part of the fun

# Sexual Problems are Pervasive and Persistent

- Loss of desire/pleasure, vaginal dryness/pain, trouble reaching orgasm
- Multifactorial: physical, psychological, social
- Rarely go away without treatment
- Fewer than 20% see health care professional



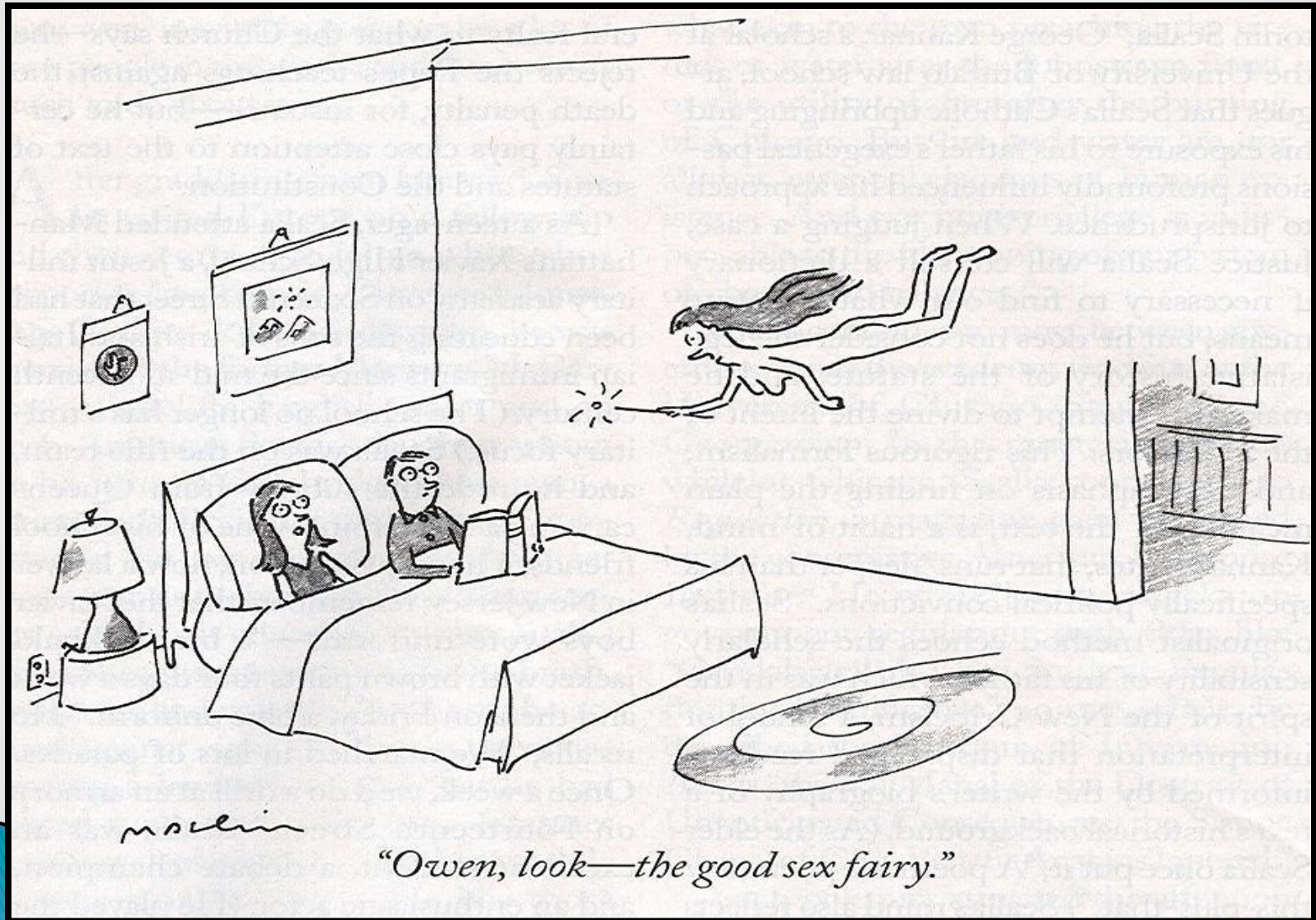


# Barriers to Getting Help

- Oncology clinics are overburdened
- Poor insurance coverage for sex
- Few gynecologists have interest or expertise
- Few Mental health professional cross-trained in sex therapy and psycho-oncology
- Few multidisciplinary clinics

# Getting Help

## ASK!





# Getting Help



- American Cancer Society
- online community for gynecologic cancers
  - <http://www.ovarian.org/>
  - <https://www.sharecancersupport.org>
  - <https://www.bebrcaware.com>
- Look for AASECT (American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, Therapists) credentials and/or couple therapist who has experience with cancer



# Take Home Notes on Sex

- ▶ Sexuality is a part of every person...from before they were born until they die.
- ▶ Sexuality is a quality of life issue.
- ▶ Each person has a right to their sexuality.



**THANK YOU!**

