

# Loss of libido after cancer Overcoming low sexual desire

(THE FEMALE EDITION)

Tips and tricks for an active sex life with yourself and/or your partner



**Dr. Kathrin Kirchheiner**



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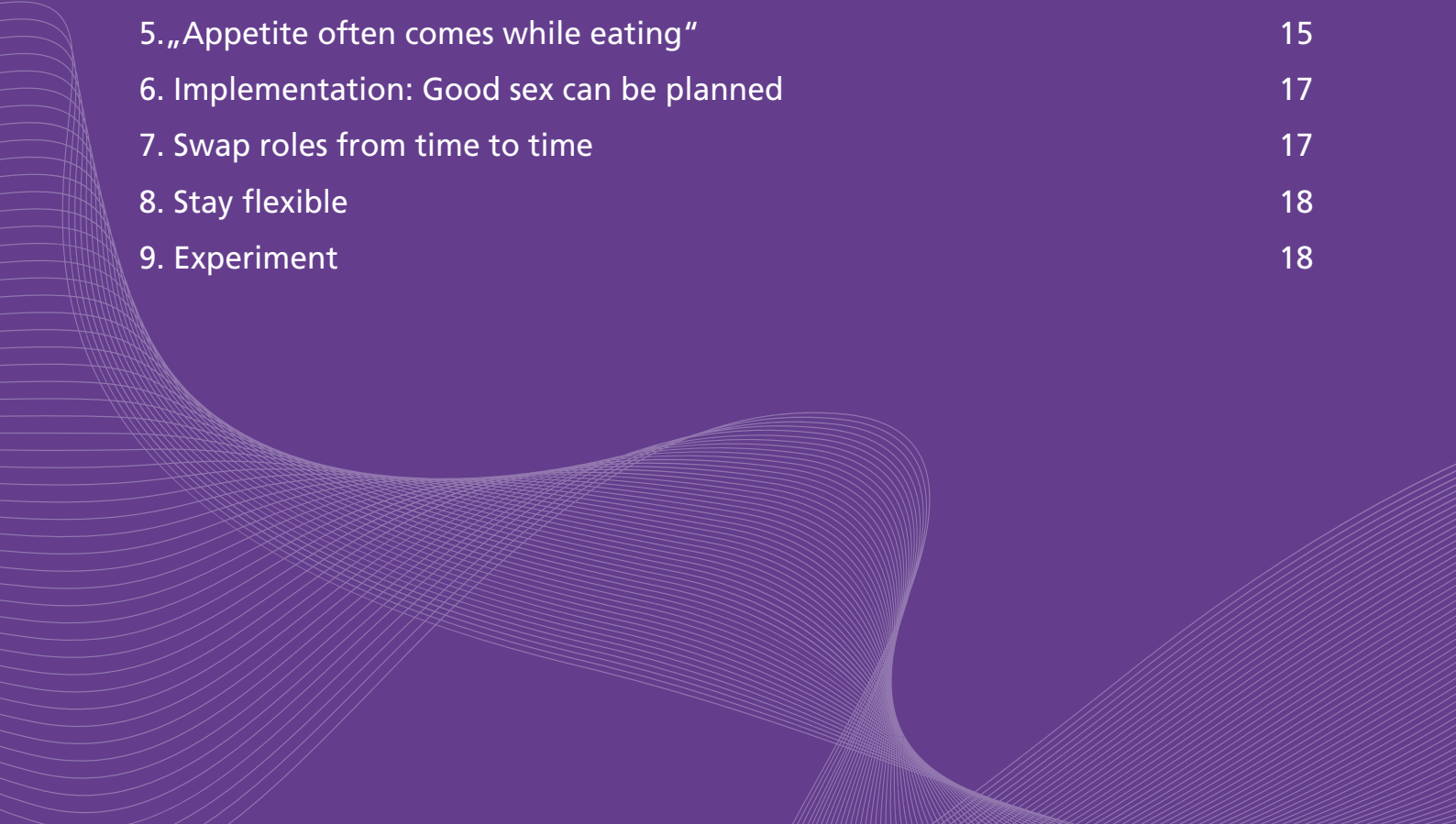
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## Has your sex drive decreased or even disappeared since your cancer diagnosis and treatment?

**You are certainly not alone!** Loss of libido is a pretty common problem in cancer survivors, due to side effects of treatment, hormonal imbalances, and stress. During the time of diagnosis and treatment, many women feel as though they are in „survival mode“ meaning sexual feelings and activities are not a priority.

Simply put, sex can be the last thing on a cancer patient’s mind during this time. Many women need to recover not only physically, but mentally. And sometimes it can be difficult to rekindle sexual desires and get back into an active sex life after such a long break. This guide is here to give you and your libido a little kick-start.

Sexuality encompasses much more than just sexual desire leading to intercourse with your partner. On a large scale, it also encompasses intimacy, sensuality and (self)care, both with yourself and with your partner. Moreover, it can be seen as a sign of vitality, vibrancy and, finally, returning to a normal life. For many cancer survivors, libido stands for a defeat of cancer, a victory to celebrate and it is undeniably something worth fighting for. In this sense, sexual desire is not restricted to having a partner. If you are single, this booklet is certainly also made for you.

It offers ideas and guidance to revive your sexual desire and make sexual activities more enjoyable, even with a low libido - regardless of your age, relationship status or sexual orientation.

**A short note as a trigger warning: This booklet is not written from a theoretical perspective; it comes from years of clinical practice and includes concrete and pragmatic advice for self-help. It does not come from a place of shame or taboo.**

At times, I explicitly name things as they are and it may go beyond your comfort zone. I want to encourage you to respect your boundaries, but also to keep an open mind. Let curiosity guide you to try out new things.

Some of the ideas and tips in this booklet will fit your personality and lifestyle; others may not. But hopefully you can take away one or two suggestions to help you start a positive change in your sex life.

I wish you all the best and an exciting journey to rekindle your desire!

*Kathrin*

## Tips for intimate self-care (no partner necessary)

### 1. Integrate sensuality into your daily life

Outside of sexual activities, think about how to stimulate all your senses and be more mindful of your body. Take time to do something good for yourself. Make a point to turn off both your TV and cell phone for a period of time to consciously focus on your sensuality.

#### A few ideas and suggestions:

- Wear sensual clothing made of a pleasant material, such as silk pyjamas or nightgowns
- After showering, take time to apply creams to your body slowly and lovingly, and focus on the sensation of your touch
- Use scented oils or put on your favourite perfume
- Light candles and create a sensual atmosphere
- Put on your favourite music and listen closely, immerse yourself without doing anything else
- Or engage in the contemplation of a wonderful work of art.



What ideas  
come spontaneously to mind  
when thinking about sensuality?  
What is sensual for you,  
personally?

### A small exercise in mindfulness:

Take a small piece of your favourite chocolate and let it melt in your mouth for at least three minutes without chewing or swallowing. As you do this, focus on the texture of the chocolate and how it changes: the smell, the taste, the different flavours, and the way your body responds to the experience of delayed indulgence. Enjoy the pleasure of the melting chocolate with all your senses.



## 2. Get in touch with your body

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You may not be interested in pleasuring yourself right now. That's not a problem. Make a conscious effort to find time in a private space to get in touch with your body – your vulva and vagina, and caress yourself intimately even if you are not sexually aroused. Touching yourself in this way does not have to have a specific goal, nor does it have to be sexually oriented or lead to masturbation. First and foremost, it should be affectionate and enjoyable. Take your time to caress your body without sexual intentions. Focus on becoming more mindful of your body's reaction to these intimate touches.

***For example: you can rub and massage your vulva with a body oil, caress your labia, and explore your vagina with your fingers.***

## 3. Explore sexual fantasies

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Sometimes you are so busy in your daily life that it is difficult to let sexual desire build. Fantasies and daydreams are a step out of everyday life and stimulate your sensuality, creativity, and vibrancy.

In your fantasies, you can experience and explore anything, including stories that are sexually exciting or romantic in nature. How you use your fantasies is completely up to you; they are entirely normal and natural. And the beauty of fantasies is that they belong to you alone. You craft and guide your own thoughts and adventures - and no one judges them. It is very important to remember that fantasies do not represent sexual wishes; they can also feature sexual acts and practices that you do not want to implement in real life.

***Allow yourself to take this step out of everyday life and into your fantasy world.***

***Why not write down the script to your own fantasy?***

## 4. Get inspired by erotic material

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Movies and other media can put you in the right mood and stimulate your sexual desire.

There are many ways to spur your imagination.

***Some suggestions:***

- Erotic short stories and novels, if you like to create the „movie in your head“ yourself
- Erotic magazines, if you prefer visual material
- Poems, music, and art, if you appreciate subtle eroticism
- Erotic audiobooks or podcasts, if you are more auditory

Erotic material is much more than pure pornography and explicit depiction of sexual acts. However, pornography itself is now also available in many different forms. There are also erotic films produced for women by women, in which female needs are emphasized (e.g., by Erika Lust).

## 5. Train your pelvic floor

The pelvic floor is an intricate web of muscles that holds pelvic organs (bladder, uterus, and rectum) and seals the abdominal cavity below while also enclosing the urethra, vagina, rectum, and anus.

The ability to alternate between tension and relaxation of your pelvic floor muscles contributes greatly to sexual health. A certain amount of pelvic floor muscle strength is necessary for sexual arousal and achieving climax. Contractions of the pelvic floor muscles generally promote blood flow in the pelvic area, especially in the clitoris and vagina. This pushes lubricating fluid through the vaginal wall and makes it wet.

The downside: If the pelvic floor muscles can no longer be consciously relaxed and are permanently clenched, the blood flow decreases and the vagina will not get lubricated. In addition, pain can occur during sexual intercourse because the vaginal canal becomes constricted and too tight.

Training the pelvic floor muscles, means first and foremost being able to consciously alternate between tensing and relaxing them and trying to increase the range between the two overtime.

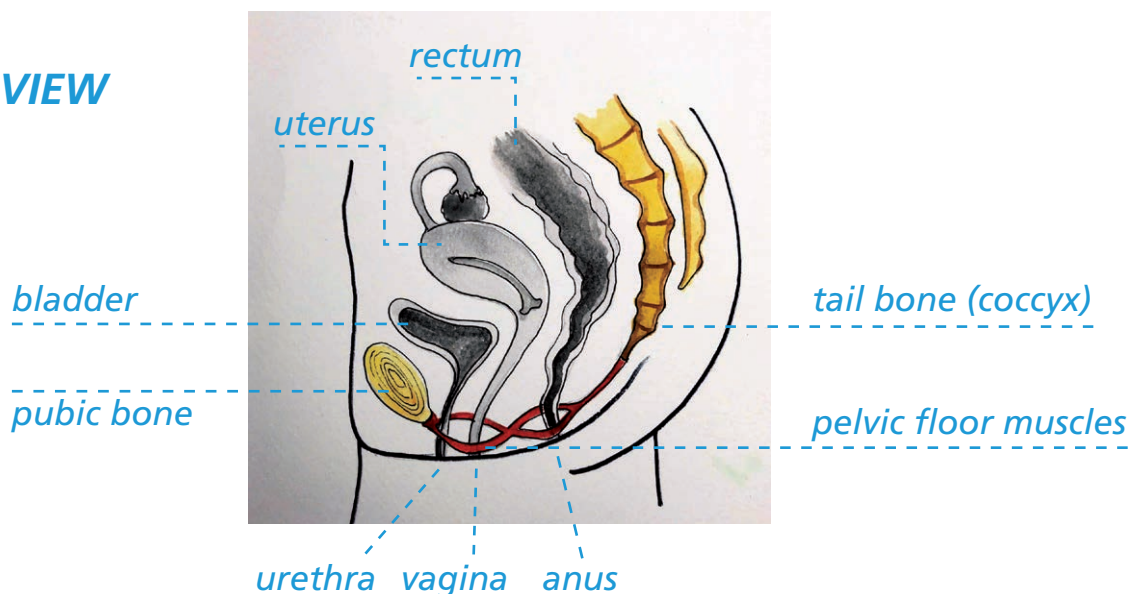
### How do you find the pelvic floor muscles?

Imagine deliberately interrupting the stream of urine by squeezing the sphincter of your urethra. You will feel the pelvic floor contracting.

It is important to keep the abdominal muscles, buttocks and legs loose, and breathe deeply into your abdomen.

Place a finger on your perineal area, the region between the vagina and the anus. When you tense your pelvic floor muscles, you will feel the contraction on your finger.

#### SIDE VIEW



## Pelvic floor exercises

### 1. Play with your pelvic floor muscles.

Alternate between tension and relaxation in rapid succession, with short pulses. Then try to hold the tension for several seconds and then consciously release it. How long do you manage to hold the tension? How many seconds can you hold 100% of the muscle tension and how many seconds with 50%? Can you get back to 0%? Do you find it easy to release the tension again? \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Feel subtle differences.

Try to activate your pelvic floor muscles with your mind. In the first step, imagine interrupting your urine stream. In the second step, imagine trying to hold back the escape of wind. And in the third step, try to constrict only the vagina. The pelvic floor muscles are complexly intertwined, so it is difficult to feel subtle differences at the beginning. With frequent practice, you will become more sensitive to these differences. Try to tune in to what your body is telling you. \_\_\_\_\_

### 3. The „elevator in the vagina“.

Imagine there is an elevator in your vagina. Take this elevator to the first floor and let a few people get in. Then continue to the second floor, again allowing a few more people in. On the third floor, one more person gets in and then the elevator descends down to the basement where everyone gets out. Repeat this exercise multiple times. \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. Just grab.

This exercise is best done in bed. Put some lubricant on a finger and insert it into the vagina. Do the pelvic floor exercises described above and concentrate on feeling the muscle movements around your finger. Try to actively grip the finger with your vagina: imagine sucking it deeper into the vagina. Next, fully release the grip around your finger. Do not expect this exercise to be sexually arousing. \_\_\_\_\_



## 6. Explore different forms of stimulation

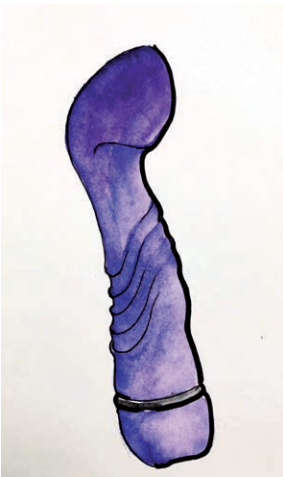
Most women have a specific way of climaxing when they pleasure themselves, a unique combination of rhythm, pressure, and stimulation. It has been tried and tested, and has reliably, over many years, lead to orgasm.

Why not try something new, with different variations of stimulation? The erotic industry has developed a variety of devices for you to explore. The focus should be on the journey, not the destination. The goal is not only to climax, but to enjoy new and different sensations.

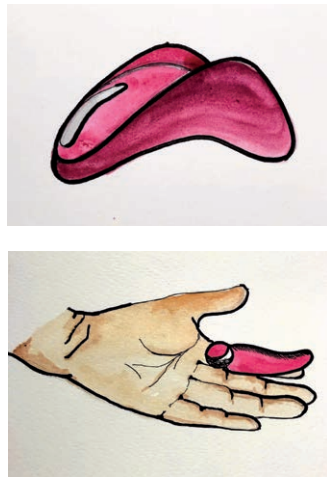
### *Here a few examples:*

1. Vibrators with a bent tip that are inserted into the vagina are targeted at sensitive areas in the vagina („G-spot vibrators“)
2. Vibrators that are applied exclusively to the external part of the clitoris and vulva. Finger vibrators belong to this category and can be used for additional clitoral stimulation during sexual intercourse.
3. Combined vibrators that are inserted both vaginally and stimulate the clitoris on the outside („rabbit vibrators“)
4. Air pulse stimulators, which are placed on the external part of the clitoris and apply pulsating air pressure waves for stimulation.

1.



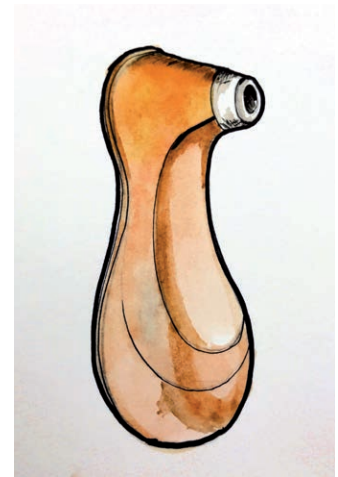
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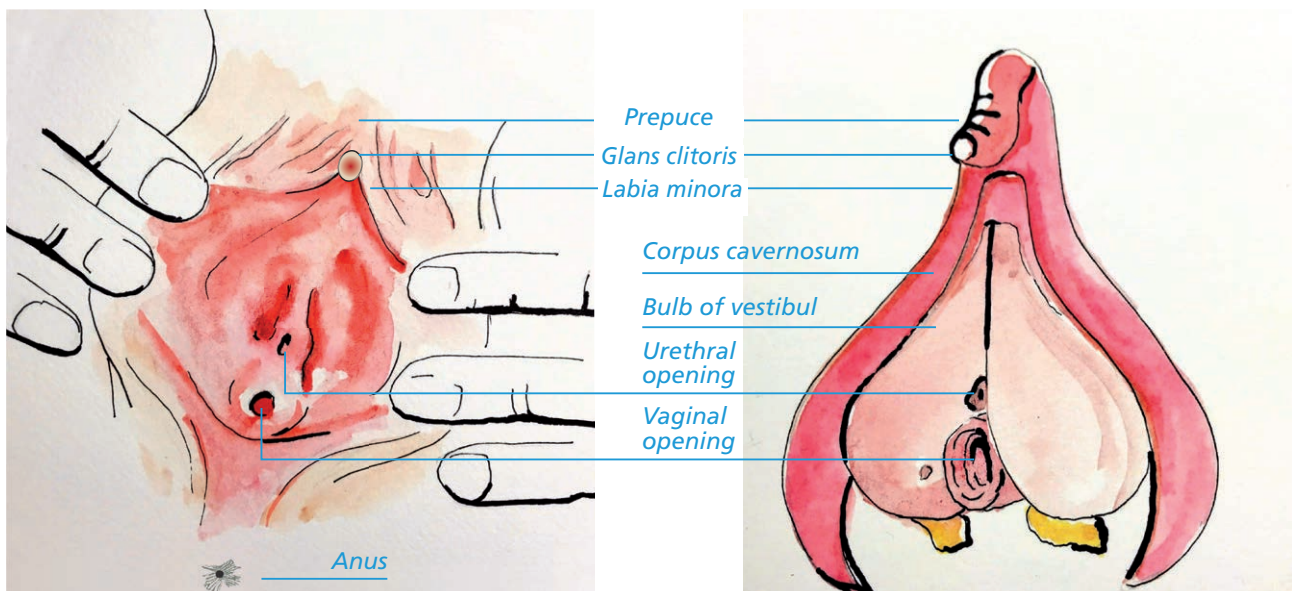


Modern and high-quality devices have different rhythms and intensity levels, are made of medically tested silicone, are quiet to use, and are often even waterproof and rechargeable.

Modern online erotic industry provides comprehensive product descriptions (regarding material, size, and power supply), and detailed explanations of use. Products are sent discreetly, with outer packaging that does not reveal the contents or the sender.

## By the way: Do you know your clitoris in its entirety?

Only a small part of the clitoris is located visibly outside the body; this is called the "clitoral glans". It is surrounded by a small fold of skin for protection. The entire clitoris is erectile tissue ("corpus cavernosum"), up to 10 cm in size and located inside the body. Two clitoral legs reach deep into the pelvis and join in front of the pubic bone to form the clitoral shaft. In addition, two clitoral / vestibular bulbs are situated on either side of the vaginal opening and elastically enclose it. During sexual arousal, the clitoris swells and erects just like a penis. The internal parts of the clitoris can also be stimulated by the penis during sexual intercourse. However, most women still need additional external stimulation of the clitoral glans during sex to reach climax.



## Tips for intimacy with your partner

**All tips for self-love and sexual activity create an important foundation for sexual contact with your partner.**

When pleasuring yourself, don't think you are withholding sexual energy from your partner or wasting your libido - quite the opposite! The more space you give yourself to focus on your own needs, the more desire for shared intimacy can develop over time.

### 1. Create time together for closeness and sensuality

**Even if you have little or no sexual interest right now, try not to exclude closeness and physical contact.**

**Ideas for showing physical affection and creating intimacy include:**

- Holding hands
- Putting your arm around your partner
- Hugging each other
- Cuddling up on the sofa or in bed together
- Taking your partner's face in your hands and caress it
- Kissing
- Massaging each other
- Dancing with each other
- Showering/bathing with each other

Tenderness can release hormones that create closeness and a feeling of connection with your partner. In addition, it has a strong calming effect on your body and reminds your partner that they are loved and appreciated.

## 2. Talk about sex

*Some couples find talking about sex easy while others may find it very difficult. However, open communication is essential to initiate positive change. Remember that your partner cannot read your mind or sense your needs, even in the closest or most familiar relationships.*

### **If you find it difficult and unfamiliar to talk about your sex life:**

- Announce to your partner that you would like to try something daring and that they may be surprised by the topic of conversation.
- Start these conversations outside the bedroom and without time pressure. Conversations about intimacy should not happen as a casual side topic, they should be the focus of attention.
- “Walk n’ Talk” – Sometimes it is easier to discuss difficult topics during a pleasant walk, preferably in nature. Walking gives you space to loosen up and frees your mind. There is less pressure as there is no constant eye contact. Find a place where the two of you are alone and can express your feelings freely.
- You might share this booklet with your partner and announce which tips you would like to discuss in more detail.
- Even if these first steps still feel unfamiliar, conversations about sex become easier with practice. With time, talking freely about sex may even become erotic and part of foreplay. Desire starts in the brain and is stimulated by anticipation and imagination.
- Don’t be afraid to seek help. Sometimes a single counselling session with a sex therapist is enough to help you move forward independently as a couple. For long-standing problems or deep-seated conflicts or trauma, continued sex therapy is helpful.



***Sometimes, a single counselling session can help overcome a mental block and trigger a small change that perpetuates further development on your own. Like a game of dominos that needs a first push to gain momentum.***

### 3. The influence of drugs and diseases on desire

Certain drugs can inhibit libido. These include drugs for the psyche, such as antidepressants or tranquilizers, but also certain high blood pressure or heart medications, and the birth control pill. It also depends on the hormonal balance, which is often affected by cancer treatments. Talk to your doctor about this; often there are alternative medications with fewer side effects impacting your sex drive.

Other common reasons are negative or even painful experiences during sex. Understandably, women react sensitively to such unpleasant experiences and their desire may diminish over time.

Pain during intercourse can have many causes which must be clarified by a gynaecologist: for example, pain due to vaginal dryness, inflammations, fungal infections, excessive tension of the pelvic floor muscles, etc.

**Sexual activity must never cause pain!**

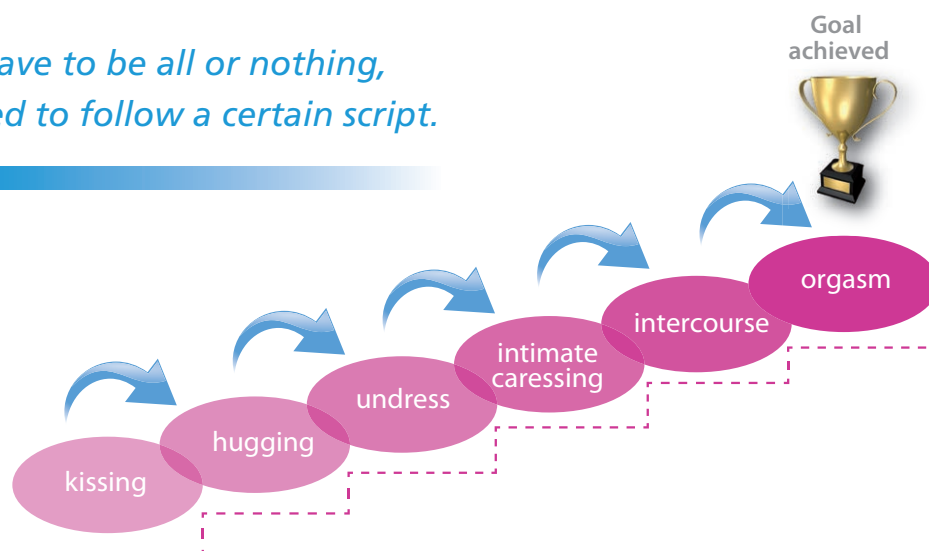
### 4. Learn to rethink: sexual activities do not have to be goal-oriented

You and your partner have probably developed a certain routine in your sex life.

Very often, sexual activities follow a certain script and one step triggers the next.

Here is an example of hetero-sexual „goal-oriented sex“: The goal here is orgasm during intercourse. Each sexual activity paves the way for the next and serves only to get closer to the “goal”.

*Sex does not have to be all or nothing,  
nor does it need to follow a certain script.*



If you have little sexual interest now, you will probably already „check out“ internally when kissing and hugging because you have no desire for intercourse. You might even dodge any physical contact to avoid triggering your partner’s expectations.

**Sex does not have to be goal-oriented. It’s time to rethink and disrupt the pattern!**

## Pick and Choose

Think of sexuality as a menu from which you can freely choose whatever you feel like. Forget the routine and the “good ol’ script”! Engage with your partner without expectations, without pressure, and without a goal.

Choose sexual activities in advance with your partner. Each sexual activity stands on its own and the objective is maximum pleasure. Indulge in it without the pressure to move further in the script.

**For example:** intimate caressing can easily stand on its own, without having sexual intercourse in mind as the „next step“. Focus instead on the pleasure and the excitement. No intimate act has another that automatically follows it.

Think of it as a sexual menu where you can pick and choose any item you want: Maybe a mixed appetizer plate, instead of a main course?

Here are a few suggestions. What additional ideas do you and your partner have?



You can explore and enjoy the path together. Trust and openness towards your partner are paramount. When sexuality does not follow a familiar pattern, there is a lot of room for curiosity and creativity, to try new things and experiment.

## 5. „Appetite often comes while eating“

As young, healthy people, we have often felt spontaneous sexual desire and lust, and responded with impulsive sexual activity.

**“One glance is all I need. We can’t get our hands off each other.”**

However, this can change over the course of a long-term relationship and become less frequent. This is normal and spontaneous sexual desire can also decline naturally with age, hormonal deficiencies and the stress of everyday life.

**Women have many different reasons and motivations for wanting sex:** the desire for emotional closeness, intimacy, recognition, self-affirmation, and appreciation. There are also more simple and down-to-earth reasons that are just as valid: Relieving stress, relaxing, experiencing something exciting, “make up sex” after a fight or simply the desire to make their partner happy.

So even if you are not in the mood, there are countless good reasons to be receptive when your partner makes sexual advances.

Sexual arousal can also slowly build during intimate activities, if you take the time to ease into it and approach the matter without expectations and pressure. Make sure that you feel comfortable enough to let yourself go.

Simply engage in sexual activities with a positive attitude and notice if your body reacts naturally by getting aroused.

**This is called „responsive desire.“**

It develops slowly and unspectacularly, but can reliably lead to a fulfilling sex life.

**For example:**

**„I’m not there yet, but this feels good. Keep on going. I’m slowly getting in the mood.“**

Imagine responsive desire as glowing embers at a campfire. When you blow at the embers softly and carefully, a small flame appears. And with time, aptitude and patience, the embers will slowly but surely turn into fire again.



**The key point is:** You don't have to be sexually aroused to engage in sexual activity if you are in an open and neutral mind-set. This might require pushing yourself out of your comfort zone in actively trying to get in the mood, instead of waiting for spontaneous desire to happen. However, recognize your boundaries and don't force yourself to sexual activities, you don't want to engage with. Sex should never turn into a chore or cause stress!

**Simply question your mind-set! Because you can't get in the mood if you don't want to want to get in the mood.**



## 6. Implementation: Good sex can be planned

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Think about how it feels when you plan your vacation with your partner: you book the trip, make exciting plans, pack your suitcase and finally climb on the plane. The anticipation is part of the experience and enhances the pleasure.

Scheduling time for sexual activity can bring a similar anticipation and excitement.

### ***Some tips for planning:***

- Arrange regular „date nights“ (or short trips) with your partner that allow you to step out of your daily life and shared routine for a few hours.
- Make these appointments binding, for example with a calendar entry, and give them top priority. Cancel only in absolute emergencies, but not because of ordinary, everyday obstacles. Just like a regular holiday.
- On a date night, the primary goal is to feel physically and emotionally close to your partner and to choose sexual activities that focus on mutual pleasure. This can but doesn't have to lead to sexual intercourse. Don't put yourself under too much pressure to perform and don't chase the dream of a "perfect date night".
- Create optimal environmental conditions for your date nights. For example, plan for an undisturbed, private area with a pleasant room temperature and a nice atmosphere (music, candles, and whatever else appeals).
- Do not wait for spontaneous sexual desire, especially if you have been suffering from low libido for a long time. Focus on sharing pleasure.
- A fixed date night schedule and joint planning with your partner will create anticipation, which may help you get in the mood.

## 7. Swap roles from time to time

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In a relationship, one partner tends to take more initiative for sexual activities. Switch roles! It will feel very different for both of you to invite your partner or get invited by your partner to intimate activities (with words or body language). This new experience can help take the pressure off you and your partner. To make this role reversal work, be clear about your expectations. Intimate activities, as mentioned, don't have to follow a set script. Sometimes it takes pressure off to be clear upfront and to set boundaries.

***Ask each other how it feels to be in the opposite role.***

## 8. Stay flexible

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Men with erectile dysfunction or women with chronic vaginal pain may enjoy some aspects of sexual intimacy but are overwhelmed by others. Many people also feel sexually fulfilled and experience pleasure without needing to climax.

### TIP:

**Masturbation is a very intimate act that can create great closeness.**

**If only one partner is in the mood, the other can try to play a supporting role while they masturbate.**

**You can hold your partner, look deep into their eyes, support and admire them, encourage and inspire them without involving your own body. Just stay close to each other physically and emotionally.**

## 9. Experiment

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Sexuality is a lifelong process of learning and development. This means sexual preferences, needs, desires, and aversions can change throughout your life. Step out of your comfort zone occasionally and push your boundaries as a couple. You can think of it as „sexual play“ where you allow yourself to try things out playfully, take risks, and explore new territory together - without having to commit to a new sex practice. In doing so, it's important to have a good (sexual) communication as a couple so you can discuss shifts in boundaries.

Upsetting your familiar routine by trying something completely different can be exciting and increase libido. Especially in long-term, solid relationships, it is exhilarating when your partner embodies a different role and feels surprisingly like a stranger.

### Ideas and suggestions:

- No matter how you and your partner habitually have sex, try to extend it. Whatever you prefer to do usually, slow down and prolong it for at least three times longer.
- Play with your partner's arousal - increase it without aiming for a climax and then let the arousal subside again slowly. This is called „edging“ or „edge play“.
- Incorporate sex toys playfully. Different stimulations and intensities can lead to completely different - and often exciting - experiences. For example, women in heterosexual relationships in particular can benefit from additional stimulation of the external part of the clitoris during intercourse.

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**ENGAGe recommends contacting your local patient association!**





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