

Cancer Body Image and Sexuality Forum

In opening our chat I would like to precede with perhaps a touch of the negativeness, namely ignorance and self-diagnosis both of which may or may not have necessitated me having to have my future surgery.

Circumstances about 15 years ago required I undertake a colonoscopy. It was satisfactory apart from the suggestion that an eye be kept on two small polyps. As I had no idea as to the significance of polyps I showed no interest in following it up nor was it mentioned by the GP. Could I have been remiss? Could this have been the onset of cancer?

Thirty years ago and then 10 years later I underwent operations for haemorrhoids so now having had two operations I was obviously an expert in this field.

About 4 years ago I was again passing blood. Those dam piles. Before a year had passed I was passing more blood than OPEC was producing oil. Better see the doc and have this sorted.

A colonoscopy discovered cancer of the bowel. Seems I was wrong. These two small polyps sprung to mind. Before I knew it was X-rays, scans, tests, premed, surgery resulting in the removal of a stage A cancer of the colon.

So how did surgery affect me physically?

Well being that what I perceived being physically changed and that to recognise but not personalise myself. I mean don't see yourself as the cause of negative events and assume that everything is my fault.

I have found the path I now tread is little different than it used to be and I'm not inhibited in any way in what event or activity I wish to partake.

Psychologically

Emotions and stress are bound to break the surface. In my case I had been pre-empted by my wife having a mastectomy six months prior, so I felt well prepared for my own event and therefore approached it head on with a positive reaction of, what needs to be done has been done.

I even engaged myself in some self-talk. I have the will to meet this challenge. I will take a balanced approach and adapt to change. I declare myself a survivor. If I had a set back, and there are a few I recall, that it is better to have no shoes than no feet.

Image

The Image portrayed is seen early on in the game. Prior to surgery I was introduced to a lovely lady the Stoma Nurse who stands you up and sits you down, trousers up, trousers down, draws a little road map and finally marks the spot for a stoma. Incidentally this about to be newly created opening "a stoma" is from the Greek word meaning mouth/opening and since it is constructed from the large bowel it is known as a colostomy.

Back to our lovely lady who again appears about a week later post surgery, and with that Mona Lisa smile suggests I hop out of bed and have a go at changing the bag. Against a myriad of pipes, tubes, bottles, catheters, the hospital gown comes off. Its

then for the first time I see myself naked, with a somewhat different image. Shocked no this will only get better, yes. Positive reaction.

From there on pipes and tubes come out and I find myself quite capable and on my way home. At this stage there are some who have undergone this surgery feel as though their whole body has changed and they are under microscopic scrutiny. Believe me there is no one up there pointing a big arrow at you saying 'Look at you'.

Know body unless you yourself wish to broadcast to all will ever know you have a stoma. Today's appliances are wafer thin and if you dress appropriately any appendage is unrecognisable. As in my case I dress for comfort and not to impress the neighbour. If a problem does arise, change to suit.

Rarely am I inhibited as to what to wear, be it formal or otherwise. With regard to a friend of mine who hikes around forest and mountaintops he reckons a colostomy is the best thing he has ever had. He carries his own toilet around with him, no more digging holes. So in my opinion the significance in dress code is in the eye of the beholder.

Relationships

Relationship and communication between my wife, family and friends was made more traumatic because as I mentioned it was the family's second shock within six months. In fact it was while I was hospitalised that my wife undergoing chemotherapy suffered a reaction and was admitted to Intensive Care and then was moved to the room next to me. As her condition was critical the family to coin a phrase; took the heat of me.

But all in all thanks to both of us having a *we will* to get better and *we will win* attitude and having received such wonderful medical and nursing treatment and attention we are both doing well. Part of this remedy in both our survival was not to cocoon or ostracise ourselves but to accept all aid and help offered to us.

Friends who visit or phone are part of the healing process. In my case something I will never forget while the wife and I were still in hospital a friend visiting her popped in to see me, he took me by the hand, not to shake but to hold and said, 'we are all praying for you, get well soon'. I think that was true communication. You don't have to offer the world to be kind. If strangers or even friends cannot communicate with you then it is beyond your control and their loss.

I will also mention that apart from the services and resources available to me whilst I was in hospital I did on release receive a 2-week daily visit from the hospital nurses and was then referred to the RDNS for further attention. By this time I was a member of the *Colostomy Association*. I found then very helpful in advice and assistance in stoma and appliance management.

As I had a more significant problem I booked an appointment and saw a stoma nurse who visits the Colostomy Association once a month. There is also on Tuesday and Thursdays (collection days) assistance with appliance and pharmaceutical management given by friendly and cheerful staff.

There is also a very good magazine *Ostomy Australia* a gem of information providing details of many different products and appliances. I tried many of these free samples until I found two, which suited. I use one in summer and one in winter.

The Cancer Council provides many a booklet and paged information also the opportunity to talk with experienced staff and if other assistance is requires a telephone peer program is available. And if all else fails there is that lovely lady the stoma nurse who is always at hand.

Sexuality

In my case the aging factor together with surgery affected the reproductive organs. No erection, no sperm flow, no sexual intercourse. Hence, I think that interrupted sexuality has a major impact on sensuality, which leaves one in the unappetising position of just looking at the menu. Sensuality or a sensual approach is in my opinion being neat in dress, clean in body and pleasant in disposition.

Just keep in mind when your half way down your next glass of beer that it's better to see it as half full than half empty. May God go with you. Thank you for listening.