



RESTORE
DESIRE.
REDEFINE
AROUSAL.



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THE INTRO

Desire is **not** one size fits most. It can be full of spontaneity or be built up over time with the right context. You deserve the fullness of feeling desire because we are all sexual beings. Sex does not have to be viewed as just intercourse. Kissing, hugging, holding, and embracing are all ways humans can show connection and love. Whether you grew up with limited sexual education, were only told to avoid intimacy and left without guidance about your body, or had open conversations with family members and healthcare providers, your early experiences matter. They shape how you understand and engage with sexual health and exploration today. You have the right to understand your body in sickness and in health.

Your personal goals may not involve desire, arousal, or participation in any sexual activity. There is no shame or guilt in wanting to focus solely on your treatments and hold onto each day when so much feels out of your control. Please keep an open mind as you increase awareness of different perspectives on the subject. Desire can be redefined when you are with a partner who wants to reshape intimacy alongside you. In a partnership, it is your responsibility to understand and accept what your partner desires. It is also completely acceptable to be single or without a serious partner and be curious about whether desire is something you wish to rekindle.

This educational resource will provide insight into how desire and arousal can change throughout your lifespan, especially due to breast cancer treatment and medications. Take time to reflect on this information and understand that not all of this may mirror how you are feeling or what you are experiencing, but know that every journey is unique. [Project Pink'd Inc.](#) hopes you remain open to new approaches to intimacy and find joy in exploring sexual health.

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REDEFINE YOUR WHY

Redefining your motivation for arousal may mean shifting your perspective toward more intentional pursuits that fulfill your purpose. How you approach intimacy and sexual health during active treatment or survivorship may change how and why you define desire. Your mind and body can grow more connected by taking the time to check in with yourself. There is no shame in not knowing, or not wanting to redefine, your “why”. You deserve to have a choice in how desire and pleasure enter and exit your body and mind. Is your why for yourself, your child, or your partner? Wanting to be loved or feel desired is a natural flame inside you, but the strength and power of that flame may appear different because of breast cancer side effects.

Take a few seconds to reflect on why you desire intimacy. Consider your goal in participating in these acts. Is it to climax? Is it to feel connected to your body or your partner again? Instead of simply feeling horny, do you want to participate because you know it will feel good once you’re relaxed, or because you want to connect on an emotional level with your partner? **No matter your “why,” you deserve to rediscover yourself.**

Change your perspective on desire and arousal by viewing them similarly to how you see food or hunger. Your mind can crave a favorite snack, but once you eat, your body says, “No thank you” on a physical level. At other times, you know your body needs something sweet, and if you bite into a candy bar, your mind says, “That’s not tasty right now; maybe I should try a strawberry instead.” Once you make that switch, you may feel satisfied both mentally and physically.

Approach intimacy similarly. For example, your mind says yes to self-exploration, but you are experiencing some back pain. Changing positions or adding a pillow could relieve pressure and still allow you to participate in intimacy.

It may take some trial and error to rediscover your desires. Be patient and open to new opportunities to learn about your mind-body connection.



COPING WITH THE CHANGES OF YOUR BODY

Grief, although painful, can be a necessary part of growth, as it allows you to process loss, find meaning in your experiences, and emerge with greater understanding and strength. Whether you are grieving the loss of a breast (or breasts) or experiencing changes in your self-esteem due to body image, you have the right to grieve. It is acceptable to feel angry or sad about the loss of your past self. **Finding acceptance of these changes can become challenging at times as well.** Acknowledge the present moment without resistance or denial by making peace with what cannot be altered. At the same time, understand that you have the potential to transform and grow in the future.

Some changes may be temporary, so start by attempting to become comfortable with feeling vulnerable. Can you remember being a teenager or young adult trying to learn about your body's changes? It may have been an awkward and uncomfortable time of adjustment and discovery. You deserve to discover how your body and self-esteem can affect intimacy. You may feel uncomfortable accepting a loss of desire or a lack of intimacy, but as you discover how limitations can open doors to feeling desire and connection, you can take the necessary steps forward.

Many intimacy limitations have **fun** solutions:

BE ACTIVE AND MOVE YOUR BODY

TRY HOBBIES THAT ARE NOT SEEN AS INTIMATE

CREATE A SAFE SPACE

LOOK INTO A MIRROR



COPING CONT.



BE ACTIVE AND MOVE YOUR BODY. Dance, yoga, walking, or swimming can help reduce stress and foster a deeper connection between your mind and body. Choose an activity you previously enjoyed. Allow yourself to demonstrate your abilities and have a positive experience. Do not be discouraged if you feel your body is not as strong or as in control as it once was. You can begin slowly and take your time.

TRY HOBBIES THAT ARE NOT SEEN AS INTIMATE. Visit the library and browse through magazines, create a mantra and recite it aloud, play a card game with a friend or partner, paint an old coffee mug, or volunteer at a local shelter. Do things you used to love or discover new joy in new hobbies.

CREATE A SAFE SPACE. Within your environment, create a positive space where you can go physically or mentally to feel validated and safe. Revisit this place often, allowing yourself to check in and connect your mind to how your body feels, or to ensure your body is in tune with your mind. It can be sitting in a beanbag chair under a library window, closing your office door and putting in earbuds to silence your surroundings, or listening to soft music while sitting in your car with the seat reclined. This space is for you to let yourself be present and reflect on the next best step.

LOOK INTO A MIRROR. Body image healing through the use of a mirror can help create a more positive perception of your body without judgment. Focus on the experience of being in your body instead of looking at it with guilt or frustration. Gradually exposing yourself to this approach can assist in reducing distress over time (2023). For example, begin by looking at unaffected body parts fully clothed to build comfort using a mirror. Slowly extend the time spent reflecting on affected areas focusing on acceptance rather than judgment.



WHAT IS DESIRE?

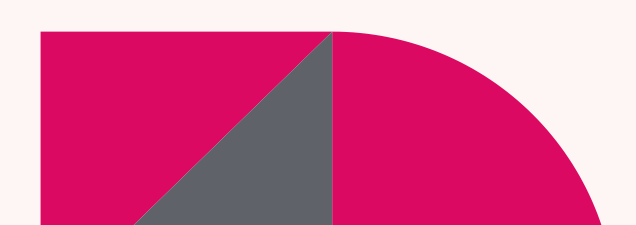
Desire is born out of feelings, wants, and thoughts that you have; and can be based on things happening in your mind. Desire does not have to be centered on intercourse.

There are many forms of desire, and how your body and mind respond to stimuli may change. You do not have to have all forms of desire to feel desirable or participate in intimate activities.

Spontaneous Desire may be described as the urge to participate in intimate acts that appears suddenly. Spoiler alert: how you see “desire” on television shows or in movies is not the norm for everyone, everywhere, and that is okay.

Responsive Desire is how one reacts to a romantic setting or sexual activity. It can build while having a deep conversation or a loving touch. This type of desire provides insight into how emotional connections and the right context can encourage your mind and body to allow desire to start flowing (i.e. cuddling, kissing, massage, quality time, sexting).

Contextual Desire takes into consideration your environment and the context of why you are participating in an intimate act. This type of desire can fluctuate depending on current life experiences (i.e. caregiver burnout, side effect of new medication, or an increase in pain or fatigue after treatment).





DESIRE CONT.

As you discover a form of connection, keep an open mind and remember desire can look different in how it presents itself to you and/or your partner(s).

Sexual Desire is a combination of emotional, mental, biological, and social factors and varies from person to person (2024). This can be seen as the mental aspect, your “libido” (2019).

Sexual Arousal is the capacity to recognize stimuli and respond with arousal (2024). This is viewed as the physical part (2019). Your body can respond with increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, dilated pupils, flushed skin, increased breathing, enhanced blood flow, lubrication, sustained erection, or muscle spasms. Arousal will be defined in more detail in the upcoming section of this resource.

Start to redefine what desire looks like for you (with or without a partner):

- **Communication:** Through conversation with yourself or a trusted individual, you can understand your desires and dislikes. Reflect on the last time you asked yourself if your wants or needs have changed due to medication or treatment.
- **Expectations:** Be clear about your “why” when seeking to restore desire. Determine the value in expressing to your partner(s) how you hope to move through the journey of intimacy after diagnosis or treatment.
- **Intimacy:** Create new environments that can foster connection and desire. Many things can be considered “sexy” if you choose to make them so. Sexy is in the eyes of the beholder.



DESIRE CAN BE FOUND IN FRIENDSHIP

Maintaining healthy relationships does not have to start or stop with a partnership. You have the right to express intimacy toward family members (i.e. hugging your sister after a long time apart, kissing your son goodnight on the cheek, holding your grandmother's hand on a walk, or bathing your dog).

If you are eager to create intimate conversations, keep in mind:

- Plan a time to talk in a non-distracting space.
- Start on a positive note, expressing your appreciation for their relationship.
- Talk about your expectations using "I" statements to avoid assumptions about the other's intentions.
- Ask open-ended questions and ask them to elaborate if necessary.
- Listen to understand, not to respond. Allow yourself to be open to how they respond to your questions and express the value of their time in this conversation.
- Acknowledge differences and your eagerness to work toward meeting your need and each other's needs.

The bonds we share beyond the physical are the ones that truly sustain us, reminding us that love and support transcend distance and time. They nurture our souls, offering a deep connection and a sense of belonging that goes beyond what the eyes can see.



WHAT IS AROUSAL?

Arousal refers to the mental and physical state of increased alertness, wakefulness, and responsiveness to internal and external stimuli (2024).

Arousal can be broken down into physical and psychological forms.

Physiological/Bodily Arousal can lead to increased heart rate, pupil dilation, increased blood pressure, and breathing rate.

Psychological Arousal refers to the subjective experience of mental stimulation (2024). It is linked to attention and motivation and varies from a low relaxation state to a high anxiety state (2024).

Your state of arousal can be influenced by stress, pain, medication, sleep deprivation, relationship conflicts, low self-esteem, fatigue, emotional imbalance, and environmental influences. Individuals can prefer different levels of arousal. Exploring how your body and mind can receive safe intimacy during treatment and survivorship is essential.

Be open to changing or redefining your perspective on arousal. Think of it as excitement!

Picture this: You find yourself scheduling times to be intimate with yourself or your partner(s). Your heart is beginning to race, and you start to breathe faster thinking about how joyful everyone may feel getting together. Take the time to be present in this moment. Does it feel good? Hold onto that for a few more seconds. THIS IS DESIRE AND AROUSAL. You are creating that build-up!



CREATING SELF-AWARENESS

TAKE THE TIME TO BECOME AWARE OF ME, MYSELF, AND I.

Body Image refers to your thoughts and feelings about your body, which can be influenced by perception and cultural factors (Ayub et al., 2018). Treatment, surgery, or medication can significantly impact an individual's body image and self-esteem (Kocan & Gursoy, 2016).

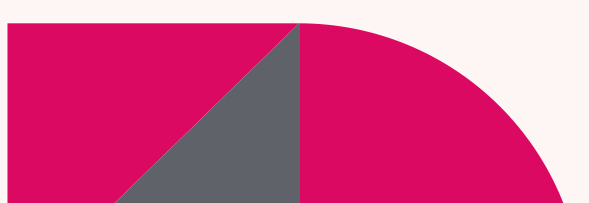
Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, values, and actions (2024).

Mindfulness, self-awareness, reflection, and self-examination can all be viewed as approaches to unlocking growth and healing in many individuals (2024). Research shows that reflecting on your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings can influence your actions and emotions (2024). A study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that individuals who engaged in self-reflection activities were more effective at coping with stress, leading to improved psychological well-being (2024).

Two cognitive-behavioral approaches to creating self-awareness and mindfulness will be discussed within this educational resource:

- **Mirror Exposure Therapy:** Shown to improve body image and body satisfaction (Griffen et al., 2018).
- **Reflect Therapy:** Structured approach to self-awareness which combines cognitive-behavioral therapy with mindfulness (2024).

Your goal when utilizing these strategies may be to gain a more in-depth understanding of your behaviors or beliefs, in the hopes of gaining personal growth and healing. Even without a specific goal, using these approaches can create opportunities to pause your life and quiet the space around you to reconnect with your inner-self.



MIRROR EXPOSURE THERAPY

The National Institute of Health describes mirror exposure therapy as a validated treatment to improve body satisfaction and self-esteem (2023).

This approach allows you to face your self-perceived flaws while learning to appreciate the journey your body has gone through and may continue to undergo. Occupational therapists (OTs) are skilled and knowledgeable practitioners who have utilized mirror therapy with individuals (Corning & Hildebrand, 2022). Breast cancer patients are encouraged to seek guidance from knowledgeable OTs to explore and benefit from effective mirror therapy interventions.

This may be a challenging strategy, but there is value in breaking free from perceptions of your body after treatment or surgery. **Give yourself permission to explore this approach.** You do not have to stand in front of your full-length mirror in your birthday suit, unless you want to. You can start small. Take 5-10 seconds to look in a mirror fully clothed after brushing your teeth or washing your hands. Take a deep breath in for 4 seconds, hold for 5, and breathe out slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds. One breath can start a ripple effect and before you know it you can be with yourself gazing into the mirror with acceptance of how you feel and what you see.

Take Action:

- Look at a particular part(s) that causes you distress.
- Describe it in positive/neutral language (round, dark, flat, wrinkled, tight, loose); avoid harmful statements.
- Observe different body parts or your body as one unit.
- Remember it's difficult to be positive and judgmental at the same time.
- Start with short, manageable sessions in a safe space.



REFLECT THERAPY

Reflect therapy has been practiced for decades as a strategy for self-examination and is recognized for promoting mental health and personal development (2024).

Mindfulness and self-awareness are key components of reflect therapy. It allows you to be present in the moment without judgment, while also allowing validation of your emotions through self-reflection (2024). This therapeutic approach can utilize guided imagery to create positive mental images, promoting insight. You can visualize yourself overcoming a barrier due to surgery or create a peaceful space within yourself where you can wear any clothing that validates your self-expression. Reflect therapy provides opportunities to self-reflect on how your journey with desire and intimacy has changed due to breast cancer and treatments. Like many health and wellness strategies, this therapy approach can require creativity, intention, and consistency.

Benefits of reflect therapy include promoting emotional regulation, reducing stress, improving decision-making and problem-solving skills, increasing self-awareness, and enhancing self-understanding and personal growth. It can also lead to better communication skills (2024).

Take Action:

- **Set aside a specific time each day to reflect.** Make it a regular part of your day to be consistent, such as while sipping your morning drink of choice or during your nightly skincare routine.
- **There's an app for that.** Guided meditation videos, journaling apps, or prompted journal themes can provide support in finding your best approach to self-reflection.
- **Look to the mirror.** Many individuals can utilize a physical mirror to perform external self-reflection as well. Use body positive language if you begin to reflect on body image.
- **Resistance is normal.** When taking on a new habit, there may be bumps along the road and uncomfortable feelings. Start slowly and allow yourself to accept this new journey to self-awareness.

TAKE ACTION!

Does your view of intimacy change over time?

Yes!! And that is okay! Whether it is because of past relationship trauma, changes in medical status, or growth in self-awareness, your knowledge of intimacy is changing. The way you experience intimacy may look different at the age of 16 compared to the age of 75. You are allowed to change your perspective on how you receive and provide intimacy. Learning how your perspective of intimacy has changed due to treatment, medication, or diagnosis can give insight into how you want to grow in desire.

Be proactive. Try to re-learn how your body and mind respond to intimacy. Here are some fun, low-cost activities that can help you rediscover your desire. You can participate with a partner(s) or within your own space. Some of these activities may appeal to you more than others but do not lose hope. Rediscovering desire while growing in self-awareness is a journey within itself. Give yourself grace and provide acceptance for yourself to be open-minded to different strategies on arousal.

- **Take a love language quiz.** This allows a better understanding of how you prefer to give and receive love.
- **Twenty-one questions.** This conversation-starting game allows deeper conversation with yourself and others.
- **Take time for self-exploration.** Exploring senses (taste, touch, smell, sight, balance, hearing) can create opportunities to discover how your body and mind responds to self-stimulation.
- **Talk with your healthcare provider.** Schedule a time to speak with your healthcare provider or cancer team about any concerns with your sexual health. Many treatments and medications can affect your level of desire.



CONCLUSION

This educational resource was created for those who are personally affected by breast cancer diagnosis, treatment, medication, and survivorship. Sexual health and intimacy are often overlooked topics of discussion during cancer treatments. More research needs to be completed to increase awareness and importance of addressing sexual health concerns during the continuum of care. **Project Pink'd Inc.** is proud to provide you with this resource. For more information on intimacy and breast cancer community resources, go to projectpinkd.org.

Scan the QR code below for additional resources and references that were addressed within this educational booklet.

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