HELPING SENIORS NAVIGATE ISSUES RELATED TO DATING, RELATIONSHIPS, AND INTIMACY

BY JENNIFER HAMMERSMARK, RCC
We are living longer than we ever have before, and along with our healthier, more active lifestyles, issues around dating, relationships, and intimacy amongst the older population are becoming more important — and coming up more frequently in our practices. Seniors may not always be as forthcoming about these issues, but when they do speak about their concerns, you’ll want to be ready to listen and provide them with helpful, positive guidance. Here are some increasingly common areas of concern among seniors and some resources to support them.

SEXUAL ISSUES AND INTIMACY
I remember 20 years ago in my practice, having a client over the age of 70 was rare. Now, I have had the pleasure of having served many older clients, one of whom was 100! Yes, a spunky old guy who drove his own car to my practice and walked up the two flights of stairs to my office.*

But another case involving a lovely 74-year-old gentleman still tugs at my heartstrings. His doctor referred him to me, because he was not sure if he was suffering from depression or if he was actually having some cognitive decline. After a couple of sessions together, we began talking about the losses associated with aging. He spoke of his regret of retiring in his 50s — using his brain less and having less contact with peers — and the sadness of not being able to “be” with his wife anymore.

When I probed further, I learned that he hadn’t been able to make love to his wife for a year and a half. They had been married for over 50 years and had had a vibrant sex life.

When I inquired if he had spoken to his doctor about his inability to have an erection, he said “Oh no, that would be too embarrassing.”

When I asked further if he had spoken to his wife about his problem, he replied, “No, I couldn’t do that. I don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

To collaborate on his cognitive functioning, I got permission from him to see his wife once on her own. After a discussion about various topics, the subject of the couple's sex life came up, and she commented that it had been a long while since they had made love. I asked her how she felt about that.

“Oh, it’s very sad. I really miss it,” she replied.

When I asked if she had talked with her husband about this, she said, “Oh no, I don’t want to hurt him!”

Oh my, we do have a problem — a big problem no one is talking about. They were both being so careful, because they loved each other so much. But you can’t fix something you are not talking about. Fortunately, through our work together, I was able to give my client the confidence and tools he needed to talk to his wife about his challenges and provide him with some alternatives to intercourse that would rekindle the intimacy they both missed.

**RESOURCES**

**Zoomer Magazine: Not Talking About Sex With Your Partner? Start Now.**
“Very sexually satisfied individuals were most likely to report frequently communicating their sexual likes and dislikes with their partner.” By Tara Losinski. September 14, 2017

**Naked at Our Age, Talking Out Loud About Senior Sex**
A book written by Joan Price, sex advocate and author.
www.joanprice.com/nakedatourage.html

**69: Love Sex Senior**
A great documentary film on people over 70 giving us a peek into their sex and love lives.
www.imdb.com/title/tt3473032/

**CARE HOMES AND ACCOMPANYING ISSUES**
Another issue we are now facing as a society is the effect seniors’ facilities and care homes are having on people. In some situations, spouses are sleeping in separate beds for the first time.

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*All cases and details have been altered to protect client privacy.*
How do they cope with the loss? How can they maintain intimacy without cohabitating? Again, being able to talk openly about this and to problem-solve alternate options with our clients is very important.

One of my clients a few years back came to counselling for the very first time for this reason. She was in her 80s. Her husband’s health had declined quickly, and he went to a care home and their home was sold. My client was able to go to the same care home, but in a different wing — on the other side of “locked doors.” She was so sad. They had never spent a night apart. The benefit of counselling for her was my being a neutral party who could offer support. She was so grateful to be heard, and we ended up talking about all of the options she and her husband could implement to still be intimate. She was a very fine, super-sharp woman who just needed to come to terms with her new circumstances.

Intimacy comes in many forms, of course, not just sex. Cuddling naked, kissing, massages, holding hands, deep conversation, and even sitting next to each other on the couch while watching a movie can all be intimate acts. Connecting in a meaningful way with someone you love is intimate. If we can help our clients embrace options that work for them, we are doing a great service.

There is another issue counsellors should be aware of regarding care homes. For so many years it has been difficult for LGBTQ individuals to come out, and now it is finally starting to become easier — until they go somewhere where it is not. Some LGBTQ seniors in some care homes feel the need to go back into the closet in order to be treated kindly. Counsellors with LGBTQ senior clients are advised to be aware and ask their clients questions about their comfort level in their care homes.

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RESOURCE
Film about LGBTQ Seniors
gensilent.com

▲ SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS
Another revelation is the rise of STIs amongst seniors. According to Health Canada, national rates of STIs for people 60 and over have increased significantly. Since the early 2000s, the number of cases of syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea has increased amongst seniors, and HIV in this age group has also increased but more gradually. In 2015, there were 501 new reported diagnoses in people over the age of 50 and 158 diagnoses in those over 60, accounting for 23.9 and 7.5 per cent of all new cases.

Florida, home to more than a half million Canadian snowbirds every year, has the highest HIV and sexual risk behaviour rates for people over 50 in the United States.1
How can we help? Don’t assume that just because people are older, they are not having sex. The conversation about safe sex needs to happen.

RESOURCES

Public Health Agency of Canada
Q & A: Prevention of STIs Among Older Adults.
www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/QA-STI-EN-FINAL.pdf

The Ultimate Guide to Sex After 50: How to Maintain – or Regain! – a Spicy, Satisfying Sex Life
A book written by Joan Price, sex advocate and author.
www.joanprice.com

Everything Zoomer
Zoomer magazine, which is connected to CARP (formerly Canadian Association for Retired Persons), is an online and print magazine with a wide range of articles for seniors, including frank discussions about dating and sexuality.
www.everythingzoomer.com

Lovingly Arrogant: From Chaos to Contentment
A book written by April Lewis of CARP. Lots of stories in the book about dating and sex.
lovinglyarrogant.com

► DATING
So what about the couples who aren’t couples anymore? Perhaps their partner has died, or they are divorced, or they were never coupled. What does their dating future look like? They deserve to pursue love like anyone else. But what to suggest as a starting point?

There is the modern-day option of putting up a profile on an internet dating site. Some folks are actually up for this, and that’s great. Ramona Kaptyn, for example, is a former journalist, teacher, and currently president of the White Rock Surrey Chapter of CARP: A New Vision of Aging for Canada. Ramona is happily approaching her 72nd birthday and has her own story of being an older, single woman and wanting a relationship. She met a man on match.com in 2010 when she was pushing 65. She found him hard work having to “kiss a lot of frogs” before finding the guy she loves. “Really, it seems I have known him forever, and he feels the same,” she says. They are still happily together today.

However, if your clients are not up for the internet meet, there are some other options, including many great local organizations that purposefully host events so seniors can socialize and meet other people, including potential dating partners: CARP, local community centres, lawn bowling clubs, bridge clubs, and others. Helping clients to become more socially active can have a positive effect emotionally and physically.

RESOURCES

A fantastic documentary from 2015 (DOXA) on a speed-dating event for 70+
www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/the-age-of-love-speed-dating-70_n_6699960

► MASTURBATION
Last but not least, there is that good old-fashioned kind of sex — the kind you have on your own. You guessed it: masturbating. When a man has an orgasm, he gets a good dose of testosterone running through his blood stream. When a woman does, she gets a boost of oxytocin, which is not only good for feelings of well-being, but also regulates hormones and may even increase bone density. All of this is good for mental and physical health and allows us to continue to embrace our sexual selves.

Opening up this conversation with our clients is very important. They may be doing it already. They may not be, but maybe they want to. And maybe they need some support and guidance and have questions they want answered. In the safety of our offices, all of this can happen.

LAST THOUGHTS
As counsellors, we have a unique opportunity to peek into our clients’ lives — the very private, intimate parts of their lives. That privilege has extended into the growing population of seniors, so it is important to be savvy about this generation of sexual beings. Ask the hard questions, be aware of the challenges, and be informed about all of the great resources available. Because one day, you may find yourself in the presence of a shy, quiet, 74-year-old man who dares to share.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CARP
CARP is Canada’s largest non-profit advocacy association for older Canadians with more than 300,000 members aged 50-plus.
CARP works with all levels and all parties in government to advocate for better healthcare, financial security, and freedom from ageism.
www.carp.ca

OPT Options For Sexual Health
Includes a resources tab for Sex and Aging.
www.optionsforsexualhealth.org

NSPN 7740 - Introduction to Sexual Health Rehabilitation 1
A BCIT School of Health Sciences course regarding sexual health rehab issues related to aging, illness, etc., and impact on persons/couples.
www.bcit.ca/study/courses/nspn7740

Dr. Jennifer Hammersmark, RCC (www.doctorjen.co) owns The Counselling Group, a co-operative of therapists who practise together.
www.counsellinggroup.co

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