

PROMOTING POSITIVE SOLUTIONS

QUESTION: *I am a 72-year-old widowed male. I read in the September issue about the reader whose parents didn't tell her about having polio and only discovering it as an adult. I had a similar experience and have always felt my parents were ashamed of my polio, not just wanting to protect me, and this had a scarring effect on my self-esteem growing up. I have let this issue go, but I cannot forgive them. I feel the "they did the best they could do" explanation I have read in self-help books pushes me to forgive, which does not feel doable for me. I have been able to forget, but not forgive. Is this healthy?*

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

In a word, no, it's not healthy. It is actually in your own best interest to come to a place of forgiveness. Numerous studies indicate the benefits of forgiveness. Let's keep two things in mind as we consider this.

First, what exactly do you need to forgive? Is it the withholding of the information that you had polio, or is it the shock of how you found out, or it is the idea (not necessarily the reality!) that they were ashamed of you as a person with polio, or all of these? Becoming clear on what you need to forgive might help you – it's not a blanket "I forgive you (parents) of any and all wrong doing" but rather a more specific "I forgive you for not knowing that telling me as a child was better for me" (for example).

And second, forgiveness is not the same as saying "I would have done it the same way you did if I had been in your position" – forgiveness is not the same as agreeing. It is more akin to understanding – "I understand why you did it, given what you knew, what you thought was best, that there was no one to ask, that you did not mean for it to hurt me further." You do not say if your parents are still alive; given your age, I am guessing they might not be. It is easier to forgive a real person than an abstraction.

I always encourage my clients to make peace with their parents before they lose the parents, not so much for the parents' sakes, but for the adult clients' sakes. Sometimes what is important is saying something to someone who has wounded you, even if you do not believe they will genuinely hear it. This is a milestone of sorts, i.e., giving up the fantasy that your parents will get it right if you just give them one more chance, and recognizing that you need to say something anyway, that the *saying* is the important part.

Notice that I did not start by defending your parents or trying to explain why they might have withheld your polio from you. I take it on faith that they would not have knowingly done something that would be so hurtful to you if they had all the information available to them about options and probable consequences.

You already know about the absence of any role models, a history of shamefulness about disability, the scary views of eugenics circulating around the time of World War II, and the culture at the time of not talking about many things we are now more open about (e.g., about a child being adopted). These have not helped you. I hope this will – you will feel better, more comfortable, more at ease, more open, if you can bring yourself to forgive them. You may still feel the hurt of not having known until you were an adult, but separate that hurt from the reason you didn't know, i.e., that your parents didn't tell you.



Rhoda Olkin, PhD

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She is a polio survivor and single mother of two grown children.

QUESTION: *I am a 49-year-old female with PPS. I am divorced and finally feel ready to date again. I find that some potential partners want to be intimate first before developing an emotional bond. This causes me a lot of anxiety. I haven't had sex since being diagnosed with PPS and feel anxious about how to bring this issue up. I am not as spontaneous physically as I used to be and also have back and hip pain now. If I do choose to be intimate, how can I talk about my fears with a partner make sure it is the kind of experience I want it to be?*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

However you raise the issues, the most important thing to remember is that when and whether to be intimate is as much your choice as it is your potential partner's. Doing something that goes against your own values and beliefs won't lead to good sex or to a good relationship.

Once you've made the decision to be intimate, being able to talk openly and honestly about sex with potential partners is part of the brave new world of dating. Discussing issues of disease, contraception, preferences and physical limitations ideally should happen before any sexual encounter.

Notice I said "ideally." Given the expectations most of us have that sex – especially sex with someone we don't know well – should be something that happens spontaneously, talking about the practicalities involved can feel wrong.

But this discussion will make sex better for both of you. Remember that if your partner is around your age or older, his physical condition and ability to perform may not be what they once were either. Bad backs and knees are common. Older men may have difficulty with erections and need more time to become aroused. It may be easier for them to perform in the morning than later in the day.

In other words, even if your potential partner seems eager for sex, you can't assume you will be the only one who might have difficulties. But because of the expectation that men should always be ready for sex, he might find it even harder to discuss it – and might appreciate it if you did.

How are your dates letting you know they want intimacy? If they are asking how you feel about it, then the topic is out there. If you are interested in that person, you could simply let him know that you are and go from there. If you are comfortable with it, humor can make awkward moments easier. For example, you could say something about having told your children that if they were mature enough for sex, they had to be able to talk to their prospective partner about it first and that having never been a hypocrite, you have to do the same. Then you could raise your concerns and ask about his.

Or you could just be straightforward and tell him you would be happy to be intimate with him but that you have problems with back and hip pain and therefore there may be certain positions or activities that wouldn't work for you. You could let him know you need to plan ahead so that you won't be too fatigued to enjoy the experience. And if you are so inclined, you could suggest that exploring ways to make the experience the best it can be might be a lovely way to get to know each other better. ■



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