

How to find body acceptance after cancer or a mastectomy

Content note: This resource shares personal experiences and lived insights after surgery, including changes to the body, recovery, and the emotions that can follow. For some, hearing these experiences may feel reassuring. For others, it may bring up difficult emotions.

Please check in with yourself before reading, it's okay to step away and return when you're ready.



I clearly remember the first few days following my preventative mastectomy surgery. I'd undergone a nipple sparing mastectomy to tissue expander, with the view to exchange for an implant in a few months' time, once the skin was appropriately stretched.

I recall glancing down in my hospital gown a few hours after rousing from the slumber of the sedative, to see my breasts gone, and nothing more than a small ripple beneath the fabric of the gown. Immediate overwhelm began to hit me hard and fast – what had I done, why had I done this, would I ever like myself again having taken such a radical measure to reduce my risk of cancer?

The first time the nurses showered me, I recall sitting in the shower sobbing quietly, as they gently washed around my wounds. I held my head high, not from pride, but from the simple fear of looking down. I couldn't bear to see what I had done.

The toll the surgery took on my body positivity came as a bit of a surprise. I was always worried about how it may impact my sense of womanhood, but I did not anticipate being so distraught so quickly at the physical impact of the surgery.

As many women would know, following a mastectomy you are visited frequently by a breast care nurse to check in on your healing, drains and overall progress. They also take the time to understand and connect with you emotionally, and to help you navigate what is an overwhelming time as you rebuild strength and refocus on body acceptance.

On one visit, a beautiful nurse saw through the typical female façade of 'it's fine' and lead me to the bathroom mirror. For the first time in two weeks, I undressed, and together we looked at my chest. As I stared at the deflated expanders upon my chest, drains dangling from my arms, she spoke softly to the strength, courage and fearlessness it takes a woman to undergo mastectomy – preventative or as a result of cancer – and the power it would bring to my life as I moved forward beyond these initial weeks.

It was in these few moments of support, and of deep care from this one nurse, that I grew to accept, albeit with great resistance, my 'new' body. And whilst I knew the expanders would, over time, fill to form a breast shape, and I would eventually exchange for an implant, it felt to me like a long road ahead.



This experience, alongside my work at Inherited Cancers Australia with the incredible community of women both affected and unaffected by cancer, has encouraged me to pull together this blog that takes a realistic look at how breast and gynaecological cancers and preventative surgeries, can impact your body confidence, self-love and relationships, and how you can move through this with focus and determination (I appreciate this isn't always easy).

And, if like me, you find yourself struggling, you are certainly not alone.

Research by [Target Ovarian Cancer](#) in the US in 2016 found that 69% of women with ovarian cancer suffered a loss of self-esteem, 73% had difficulty with intimacy and 84% reported a lower sex drive. Similarly [Breast Cancer Care](#) researchers found that eight in 10 women were unhappy with their sex life after treatment and research by [Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#) found that 67% of women experienced changes to their sex lives.

Given these statistics it's clear that at least for some women, learning to love your body post cancer or post preventative surgery seems near impossible! So, we've pulled together the below advice to help support you through this difficult period:

Try not to put off looking at your scars

If, like me, you have scars or other visible changes to your body, try not to put off looking at them, with your doctor or nurse if this helps.

Take it gradually – it's normal to feel shocked and upset at first, but for most people, these feelings will ease over time. And remember to be kind to yourself, look at how far you've come, what you've been through and how brave you've been. You're incredible!

Ask for help if you need it

Don't be afraid to lean into your healthcare team, and friends and family. They are all there rallying for you. Being open about how you're feeling will help to ease those feelings and move you towards acceptance.

If the changes to your body are affecting you, your GP and healthcare team can provide strategies and support to help you navigate these changes, such as vaginal dryness, breast swelling, tightness and other pain.

Intimacy doesn't mean intercourse

Holding hands, cuddling, kissing, stroking can all help you to slowly get back to feeling closer and rebuild your confidence in taking things to the next level, or not. Being open with your partner around how you're feeling can help to alleviate the pressure you may well be putting on yourself.

And remember, it's ok to not want to be sexual – it's only a problem if it's causing a problem. And if that's the case, it's important to reach out to your GP to chat about ways to navigate and manage this with your partner, which leads me to...



If you're single, remember it's OK to take your time

The dating world can be difficult to navigate at the best of times, and harder when you're working to get back to what life was like pre-cancer diagnosis or preventative surgery. It can be incredibly tricky to know when and how to share your experience with a new partner. And while there's no simple answer to this question, it's important to feel as though you have a strong sense of trust with this person so that you can be honest and open about your feelings.

Remember, a loving partner should accept you for who you are. If your new partner can't do that, perhaps they aren't the one for you.

Allow yourself to grieve

You have experienced major changes to your body. The loss of confidence associated with this can bring many feelings; anger, sadness, defiance and even disbelief. These feelings are entirely normal, so be kind to yourself, and allow these feelings to wash over you.

If, over time these emotions do not start to subside, it's a great idea to check in with your GP for a mental healthcare plan to help get you back on track with the right psychologist or counsellor.

Exercise will boost mood and confidence

Studies have found that twice weekly strength training after cancer can improve a woman's body image and help them to feel better about their appearance, health, physical strength, sexuality, relationships and social functioning.

But don't rush things. Allow your body the time to recover and take things slowly. A gentle walk around the block as you build up to more high intensity exercise is the best way to get back into the swing of things and get yourself feeling good.

Remember the silver linings

Despite the challenges you've had to face and overcome, remember that your body has been through a lot, and you are incredible for stepping up and facing these challenges. Reassess what a 'good' or 'beautiful' body is and admire just how capable your body is. If you can get through this (and you will), you can get through anything.