

# Being frank about sex: How I reclaimed my lady parts after cervical cancer

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I love Mark, my husband of nearly four months, and yet I couldn't bear the thought of him touching me. Our newly wed life was not going as we had imagined. In fact, I avoided undressing in front of him and hugged the edge of our bed at night. He took his cues from me and never attempted to cross the invisible barrier in the center of our bed. I knew I wasn't being fair to him. I wanted to invite him in. I longed to be the way we were before, but I just couldn't do it.

At the time, I couldn't see it yet, but today I know am a survivor; a survivor of gynecological cancer. Not once, but twice. My body had been ravaged by two surgeries: one vaginal and the other abdominal followed by chemo and radiation all before the age of 30. When it was all said and done, I had two inches of vaginal canal left and it had atrophied from the radiation treatment. I consider myself a bright girl and knew the old saying it's not about size but technique; but let's be real: with what I had left of my lady parts, every tool in the shed was going to be large and not in a good way. I was terrified. I had already suffered such severe pain during my battle I just could not wrap my brain around willingly subjecting myself to more. Sex was going to be painful and I did not want any part of that physical pain. I hadn't yet realized the emotional pain it was causing both my husband and I.

Remember the fear and anticipation you had the first time you had sex? Now imagine doing it with "damaged goods." At least the first time around I didn't know what sex was supposed to feel like. Therefore, that first guy didn't have much to live up to. Today, the stakes were higher. I desperately wanted to feel normal. I wanted my new husband to still find me sexy and desire me. I wanted an orgasm and for him to enjoy being inside me, but the fear of pain paralyzed me.

The pressure was intense. Neither of us wanted to hurt the other or be disappointed ourselves. So we did nothing. We didn't talk about it. We acted like it wasn't there. Suddenly, I found myself insecure for the first time ever. When he'd go out for a drink with his brother to unwind, I couldn't resist imagining some hot, sexy girl making a move on him. Hell, he was hot, young, and still had a fully active sex drive with no outlet at home. I realized it was crazy thinking. He loved me. He had willingly married me even knowing I had cancer. He would never stray; I knew it logically, but emotionally it was taking a toll on us.

It was then; I knew I had to act. I was ready to take my life and sex life back. I met with my medical team and explained the situation. I could sense the tension in the room; even the doctors were uncomfortable with the sex topic. Immediately, I was handed a set of dilators without much explanation.

At home, I opened the box to find what looked like candle sticks with a rounded top. Was this a bad joke, I wondered. The length of each dilator was the same but

the diameters were not; I had small, medium, and large. I decided to share my new tools with Mark. I could see the curiosity on his face. I explained their purpose was to help stretch my vaginal walls in hope of someday enjoying sex again. Even as I explained how they would be I secretly wondered why they were so sterile and boring looking. I imagined them being replicas of an 1800's dildo.

We decided to do the dilation together. Some couples eat popcorn while watching TV; we dilated.

We agreed to take the process of rediscovery slowly. We drank wine and played music. Naked cuddle time became our favorite past time along with hot baths. It was so nice to be close and feel physically connected again. Slowly, I became more comfortable in my new normal.

Then one night I sat on the bed and said, "Do you want to f\*#k?" I think Mark almost fell over. He jumped at the opportunity but made sure I knew we didn't have to. But we did. We had to try some time, and my doctors kept saying, "use it or lose it." The vagina is a muscle and stretches for child birth surely it would stretch for sex. At least that's what I told myself while searching for courage to try. That first night I held a pillow over my head and cried. I only allowed him a few minutes of penetration and it felt like a knife slicing into me. I hurt and at the same time felt relieved that we had had sex. Sex was a job at that point; tough, painful, and draining. We were determined to keep trying.

Eventually, we upgraded those medical dilators for something more fun. I strongly advise visiting your local pleasure store there are all sorts of things to try and explore. The more we explored each other, the more I realized I was a big part of my own problem. My body had been through hell and back. It was just as painful as I feared. However, I was still giving into the fear. I was mentally bracing myself for the pain and tensing up when Mark touched me. My actions were actually adding to my pain and preventing me from finding any enjoyment. I had to get outside my own head. So I experimented with relaxation techniques. I found a little liquid courage helpful, along with a hot bath before the act. We indulged in more foreplay. Then it happened. I actually had an orgasm. I was back!

Achieving an orgasm after all I had experienced gave me hope. Hope that my love life could be good again, and in time, maybe even great. Repeating, that act took time. It was like finding a needle in a haystack. I wanted that needle and was determined to get it. Check out my tips for reclaiming your sex life and share my tips from my husband with your partner.

Check out my [tips](#) for reclaiming your sex life and share my tips from my husband with your partner.

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*[Michelle Whitlock](#) is the award-winning author of the memoir, [How I Lost My Uterus and Found My Voice](#). Michelle's story shares her falling in love, battling HPV and cervical cancer, facing sexual dysfunction, confronting her conflicting feelings about motherhood and becoming her own best advocate. Michelle lives in Cordova, Tenn., with her husband, Mark; their daughters, Riley Grier and Shelby-Kay; and their four-legged children, George and Charlee.*