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Exploring Sexual Satisfaction and Intimacy After T6 and Above Spinal Cord Injury: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Exploring Sexual Satisfaction and Intimacy After T6 and Above Spinal Cord Injury: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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BACKGROUND

- A SCI is a life-altering event, causing physiological, functional, emotional, psychosocial, and social losses depending on the level, nature and severity of the injury^{3,4}.
- Even though sexuality and sexual health are a recognized occupation, the adaptation and adjustment process needed to maintain sexual health post SCI is not well understood & supported¹.
- Those with SCIs T6 and above, along with severely limited mobility, have issues such as Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD) that can be life threatening and compound sexuality and achieving sexual satisfaction².
- The process of adaptation and adjustment is multifactorial, complex, and varies due to the micro-macro nature of this disability post SCI. Therefore, understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of those who have been through the process and have gained a feeling of success in restoring a sense of normalcy with their sexual health provides us with some valuable pointers that can guide future rehabilitation practices.
- The underpinnings of the Occupational Adaptation (OA) model support the examination of the press for mastery of this subpopulation with SCIs⁷.

PROBLEM

There is a lack of research on the lived experiences of individuals with a T6 and above SCI and the process they went through in achieving sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and QOL post-injury.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative capstone research project was to explore the following research question: **What is the process of individual's lived experiences in achieving sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and QOL after T6 and above SCI?**

METHODS ^{6,8,9}

Research Design

- Qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
- Constructivist Approach

Participants (N=6)

- Males with a T6 or above SCI
- 18-70 years of age
- Level of injury is T6 and above
- At least 2 years post-injury
- Willing to talk about their experiences in achieving sexual satisfaction, intimacy, and QOL post-SCI.

Data Collection

- Semi-Structured Interviews virtually via RingCentral
- Field Journal

Data Analysis

- Data was subjected to open-line coding, memoing, fracturing the data, and examining the data for emerging superordinate and subordinate themes and data saturation.

Acknowledgement: Special thanks to the participants and various agencies that played a key role in this study to support a growing field of research. Thank you to the USAHS for grant funding to support this project. This project involved human subjects; it has been reviewed and approved by the IRB.

References



RESULTS

A Journey with Acceptance and Recovery (6/6)

- Navigating Functional Losses
- Clinician Commitment Is Key
- Sexuality Cannot Be the Unaddressed Elephant in the Room



Finding One's Community Is Vital for Recovery (6/6)

- Found Confidence & "In To Me I See" Through Community & Spirituality
- Enablers in the Environment Fed Confidence & Positivity
- Introverted and Internalized Social Structures Impacting Body Image
- Living Environment and Lack of Resources Impacting Sex Drive and Agency



Intimacy Trumps Sexual Activity (5/6)

- Companionship, Partnership, and Intimacy Is Important
- Sex Is Not a Driving Force
- Intimacy is Give & Take – Traditional Gender Roles Do Not Play a Part
- Values of a Partner
- Cannot Be a Caregiver & a Lover

DISCUSSION

- Intimacy was found to be the key to sexual satisfaction. The one participant that lacked agency, was dealing with multiple issues that prevented him from exploring sexuality post injury.
- The qualitative nature of the study allowed for a better understanding of "the acceptance and journey" of this population in finding sexual satisfaction.
- Clinician commitment and support was deemed necessary for the length of each individual's journey
- The nature of the Information and support provided need to be timed right, based on the individual's journey⁵.
- Finding the right community helped seal the path to sexual satisfaction and the press for mastery.

Implications for OT Practice and Research

- Individuals that are Introverted, have a poor body image and those with limited resources may need more guidance and assistance. This theme did not reach data saturation and needs to be further examined.
- This research advocates for the increased involvement of occupational therapists in the treatment of sex and intimacy in this population, as they provide a distinct perspective to the healthcare team.