Community-Based Primary Palliative Care Community of Practice Series 4

Intimacy and Sexuality in Advanced Serious Illness

Project ECHO
Palliative Care - Canada
BY Pallium Canada

Facilitator: Dr. Nadine Gebara
Guest Speaker: Dr. Anne Katz
Date: October 01st, 2025

Territorial Honouring

The Palliative Care ECHO Project

The Palliative Care ECHO Project is a 5-year national initiative to cultivate communities of practice and establish continuous professional development among health care providers across Canada who care for patients with life-limiting illness and their families.

Stay connected: www.echopalliative.com

The Palliative Care ECHO Project is supported by a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

Health Canada Santé Canada

Project ECHO Palliative Care - Canada BY Pallium Canada

LEAP Core

- Interprofessional course that focuses on the essential competencies to provide a palliative care approach.
- Taught by local experts who are experienced palliative care clinicians and educators.
- Delivered online or in-person.
- Ideal for any health care professional (e.g., physician, nurse, pharmacist, social worker, etc.) who provides care for patients with life-threatening and progressive life-limiting illnesses.
- Accredited by the CFPC and Royal College.

Pallium Canada

LEAP CORE

Learn more about the course and topics covered by visiting

www.pallium.ca/course/leap-core

Objectives of this Series

After participating in this series, participants will be able to:

- Augment their primary-level palliative care skills with additional knowledge and expertise related to providing a palliative care approach.
- Connect with and learn from colleagues on how they are providing a palliative care approach.

Overview of Sessions

Session #	Session Title	Date/ Time
Session 1	Pain Management in the Delirious Patient	January 22, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 2	Communication: Part 1	February 26, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 3	Communication: Part 2	March 27, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 4	Palliative Care for those Living with Dementia	April 23, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 5	Gastrointestinal Symptoms in Palliative Care	May 28, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 6	Palliative Care for Adolescents and Young Adults	June 25, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 7	Interventions for symptom management; tubes and drains	July 23, 2025 from 12 to 1pm ET
Session 8	Intimacy and Sexuality in Advanced Serious Illness	October 01, 2025 from 12 to 1pm

Welcome & Reminders

- Please introduce yourself in the chat! Let us know what province you are joining us from, your role and your work setting
- Your microphones are muted. There will be time during this session when you can unmute yourself for questions and discussion.
- You are welcome to use the chat function to ask questions and add comments throughout the session
- This session is being recorded and will be emailed to registrants within the next week.
- Remember not to disclose any Personal Health Information (PHI) during the session
- This 1-credit-per-hour Group Learning program has been certified by the College of Family Physicians of Canada for up to **10 Mainpro+** credits.

Disclosure

Relationship with Financial Sponsors:

Pallium Canada

- National registered charitable organization
- Funded by Health Canada

Disclosure

This program has received financial support from:

- Health Canada in the form of a contribution program
- Generates funds to support operations and R&D from Pallium Pocketbook sales and course registration Fees

Facilitator/ Presenters:

- Dr. Nadine Gebara: Nothing to disclose
- Dr. Anne Katz: Royalties from published books

Disclosure

Mitigating Potential Biases:

- The scientific planning committee had complete independent control over the development of course content

Introductions

Facilitator:

Dr. Nadine Gebara, MD CCFP- PC
Clinical co-lead of this ECHO series
Palliative Care Physician at Toronto Western Hospital, University Health Network
Family Physician at Gold Standard Health, Annex

Panelists:

Dr. Haley Draper, MD CCFP- PC
Clinical co-lead of this ECHO series
Palliative Care Physician at Toronto Western Hospital, University Health Network
Family Physician at Gold Standard Health, Annex

Dr. Roger Ghoche, MDCM CCFP-PC, MTS
Palliative Care and Rehabilitation Medicine, Mount Sinai Hospital-Montreal

Jill Tom, BSN CHPCN ©
Nurse Clinician for palliative Home Care
Mount Sinai Hospital, Montreal

ECHO Support

Elias Cherfan

Support Desk Coordinator, Pallium Canada

Elisabeth Antifeau, RN, MScN, CHPCN(C), GNC(C)
Regional Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS-C), Palliative End of Life Care
IH Regional Palliative End of Life Care Program
Pallium Canada Master Facilitator & Coach, Scientific Consultant

Thandi Briggs, RSW MSW
Care Coordinator, Integrated Palliative Care Program
Home and Community Care Support Services Toronto Central

Claudia Brown, RN BSN
Care Coordinator, Integrated Palliative Care Program
Home and Community Care Support Services Toronto Central

Rev. Jennifer Holtslander, SCP-Associate, MRE, BTh
Spiritual Care Provider

Introductions

Guest Speaker:

Dr. Anne Katz

Dr Katz has more than 2 decades experience counselling men and women and their partners who are experiencing sexual and/or relationship issues as a result of cancer treatments. Dr Katz is the former editor of both Nursing for Women's Health and the Oncology Nursing Forum, the premiere research journal of the Oncology Nursing Society.

She is the author of 16 books, including textbooks for health care providers and self-help books for survivors and young adults and caregivers of people with cancer. Now in private practice, she continues to advise and educate cancer survivors and others experiencing sexual and relationship challenges.

Intimacy and Sexuality in Advanced Serious Illness

Session Learning Objectives

Upon completing the session, participants will be able to:

- Understand the impact of advanced illness on sexuality and intimacy. Describe how advanced serious illness affects physical, emotional and psychological aspects of sexuality and intimacy in patients and their partners

- Identify effective communication techniques to initiate and support sensitive conversations about intimacy and sexual health with patients and their families in the context of advanced illness.

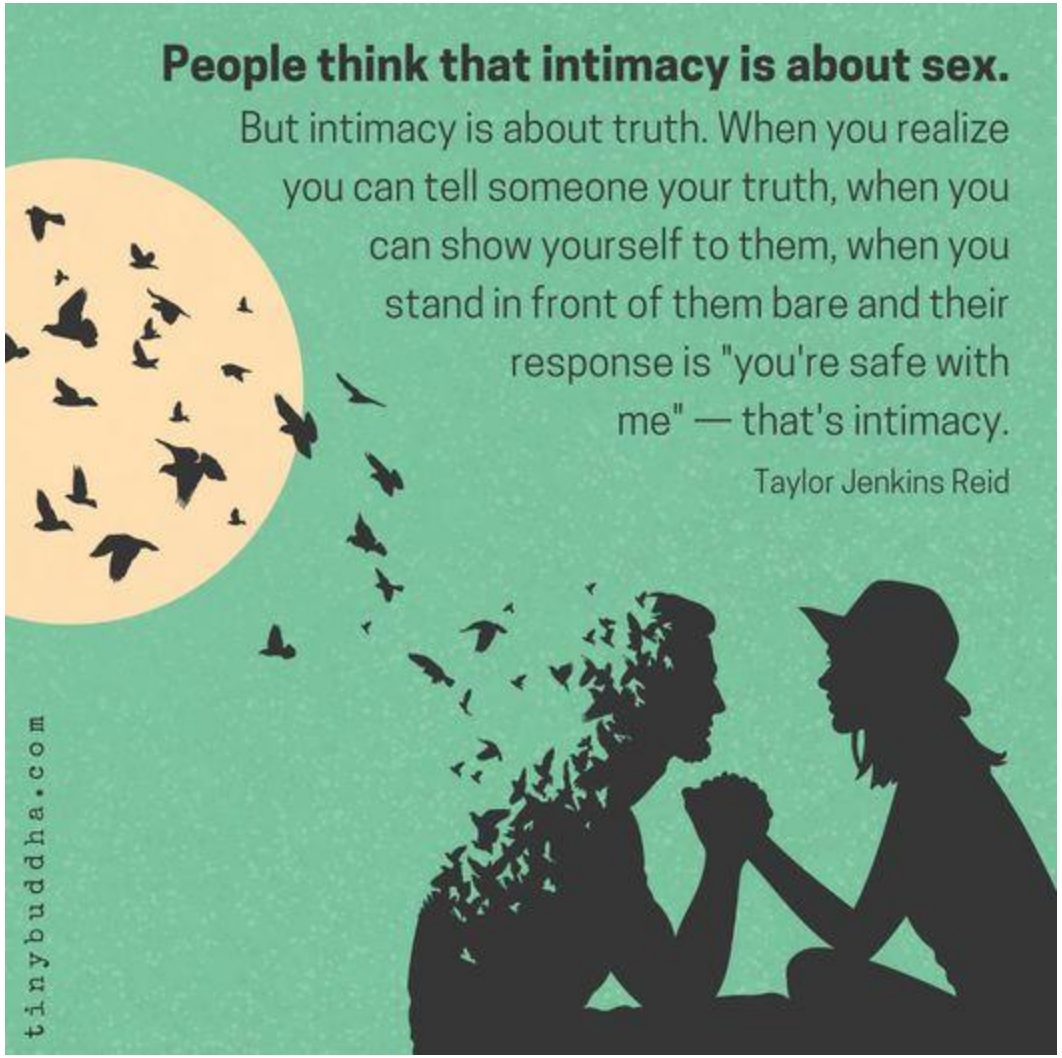
Sexuality and intimacy exist in relationships They do not necessarily involve sexual activity

Sexuality

- Need for intimacy and touch
- Self-image
- Thoughts, fantasies, dreams
- Sexual functioning

Intimacy

- Emotional connection
- Support
- Vulnerability
- Deep understanding

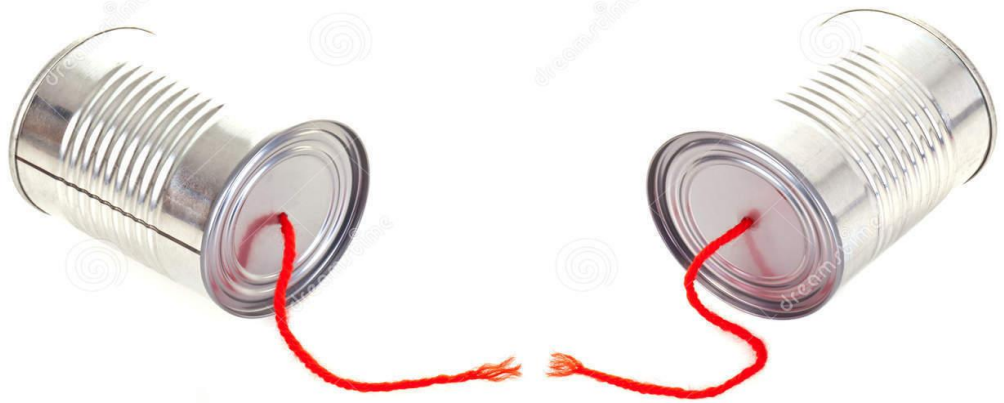

People think that intimacy is about sex.
But intimacy is about truth. When you realize you can tell someone your truth, when you can show yourself to them, when you stand in front of them bare and their response is "you're safe with me" — that's intimacy.
Taylor Jenkins Reid
tinybuddha.com

Why talk about this with people at the end of life?

- Respect for couple/individual and their life before illness
- Sexuality is part of quality of life
- Increases/maintains emotional bond
- Cessation of sexual activity is a loss

Importance of communication (Morrissey Stahl, et al., OMEGA [2017])

- Communication is key
  - Between health care provider and couple/individual
  - Between partners
- Closer relationships may develop during illness and/or at end of life
- Give permission for questions or discussion about sexuality
  - “Loving will”
- End discussion when requested



Meaning of sexuality for couples (Morrissey Stahl, et al., OMEGA [2017])

- Shift in meaning from before illness or life limiting illness
  - Transition from sexual intercourse to broader meaning
- Misunderstandings common
  - Assumption that other person does not want to talk about sexuality
  - Healthy partner does not want to hurt the other person
  - Person at end of life feels no longer attractive to healthy partner
- Verbal expressions, shared memories

Assessment of sexuality – why and why not

- Important aspect of quality of life
- Need for touch (and permission to touch!)
- Discussions with patients and partners over the course of the disease trajectory improve QoL as well as alleviate some of the stress of receiving palliative care services (Wang et 2018)
- Among patients receiving palliative care (Keleman 2019)
  - 91.7% had not been asked about sexuality
  - 48.4% reported that illness had impacted their sexuality
    - Higher among younger people
    - Higher among those who were partnered
    - 5.2% had a previous conversation with a health care provider

Factors that impact on sexuality in life limiting disease

- Age-related changes
- Hormonal
- Medications
- Attitude of health care providers
- Misunderstanding from partner
- Family attitudes
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Cognitive changes

Changes to sexuality at/near the end of life

- Psychosocial
  - Body- and self- image changes
  - Role changes
  - Depression, anxiety
- Physiological
  - Fatigue
  - Nausea
  - Pain
  - Dyspnea
- Sexual
  - Erectile difficulties
  - Vulvo-vaginal atrophy
  - Nerve damage and sensory loss

Barriers (Wang et al., Annals of Pall. Med 2018)

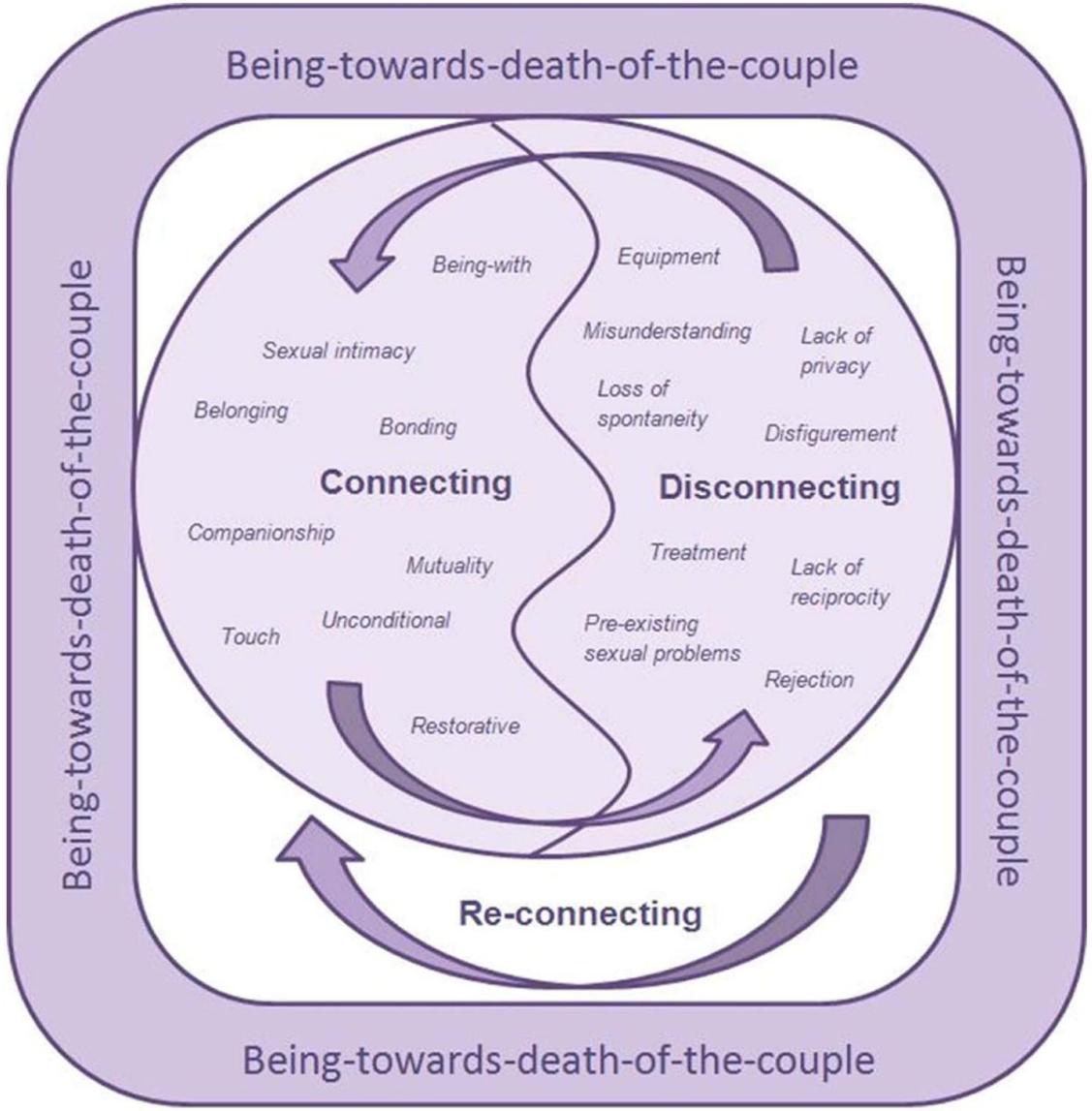
- Attitudes of health care providers
  - Discomfort
  - Age-ism
- Lack of time
- Prioritizing treatment
- Environmental barriers
  - Clinic
  - Hospital or hospice
  - Home

Facilitators (Wang et al., Annals of Pall. Med 2018)

- Initiating discussion
  - Open-ended questions
  - Curiosity
  - Use a model?
- Multi-disciplinary team involvement
- Willingness to listen, validate, support, reassure, seek solutions
- Education of health care providers
- Create opportunities for those at the end of life
  - Environmental accommodations
  - Sexual aids

Being towards the death of the couple

Taylor 2014 Palliative Medicine 28 (5), 438-447



Opening statement/question

HOW ARE THINGS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

WHAT PHYSICAL AND/OR EMOTIONAL CHANGES HAVE YOU NOTICED SINCE STARTING/ENDING TREATMENT?

Models for assessment of sexuality

- 5 As
- CARD
- PLISSIT

5-As (Bober et al., 2013)

- Ask
- Assess
- Advise
- Assist
- Arrange

CARD (Wang 2015)

- Cancer treatment can affect your sexuality/body image/relationship which is important to quality of life
- Ask
- Resources/Referrals
- Document

PLISSIT (Anon 1974)

- Permission
- Limited Information
- Specific suggestions
- Intensive therapy

Caution!

- Partner may be exhausted by care giving responsibilities
- Partner may need to begin distancing
- Be aware of feelings of guilt
- Lack of privacy

Take home messages…

- If you can talk about
  - treatment failure
  - advanced disease
  - end of life planning

- You can talk about something that brings
  - comfort
  - connection

The end….

Session Wrap Up

- Please fill out our feedback survey, a link has been added into the chat.
- A recording of this session will be emailed to registrants within the next week.

Thank You

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