



The ileostomy & internal pouch

Support Group

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The Secrets and Lies Of A Closet Ileostomist!

Katie Lawrence

New relationships always resurface our old insecurities, but for an ostomist there is one very obvious hurdle to jump...and far too many people are nervous of letting their feet leave the ground.

Most young ostomates find it difficult to initialise 'the talk' – that important chat that many of us find as difficult to begin and as awkward to explain as the 'birds and bees' talk we endured as teenagers.

Now let's face it – there is never going to be a pleasant way of discussing the finer points of bowel surgery, but that does not mean that a new partner will run screaming into the sunset as soon as you mention the topic. Many ostomates are so anxious about revealing their stoma that they try and keep it a secret as long as possible. The longer you leave it the harder it becomes to talk about, because you grow acutely aware of the fact that you have been dishonest. This triggers more stress and leaves you unable to fully enjoy the excitement of a new partnership for fear of being discovered. Dozens of the ostomists I have spoken to all agree that their more successful friendships and relationships have been with partners whom they were honest with early on. Subconscious body language often betrays us when we lie, occasionally causing your partner to be slightly suspicious of your excuses, placing an unnecessary strain on your budding romance. Openness removes the need for any deception and it makes both parties feel more comfortable – you because you hide nothing, and your partner because they have no reason to distrust you.

Experience proves that there will never be a 'right moment,' where your companion is watching *Holby City* and suddenly announces that they think ileostomy pouches are incredibly sexy. So you are left with two options; you can either tell them that "I'm running out of bags" does *not* mean that you're off on a spending spree in Prada because nothing matches your shoes – or you can wait until the lights are off and just hope that they were not paying any attention in biology classes.

Personally I favour option one.

Understandably, we all experience some level of doubt and anxiety when we first tell someone new about our surgery, especially if that person is an important part of our lives. At this time it is easy to convince yourself that your partner will be so disgusted by the news that they will move to Australia and charge you for their extortionate therapy bill. The truth is, when given the chance to be, most people are better than that. The majority of our peers, however shallow and self-absorbed they may sometimes appear, are actually decent people who are more concerned about our comfort and well-being than about our alternative bathroom habits.

Information is the key to understanding, and as long as you fully explain what your surgery entails, why it was necessary and just how important it was, most people soon realise that bowel surgery does not make you an alien or a leper, and they will be interested rather than appalled.

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Though not everyone is this considerate, the ones who will judge you poorly for having a stoma or internal pouch are usually the same people who have a string of 'exes', all dismissed because of superficial and inconsequential imperfections. These people are not worth losing sleep over, and they will learn the hard way that there are very few real people who look like Lara Croft or Superman, and that there is more to life than mere aesthetics.

I learnt long ago that I will never be anything other than myself, and there will always be people who cannot or will not accept that. But an ileostomy pouch is not a character flaw that I should strive to fix for the good of mankind, so it is their problem - not mine.

Yes, in a perfect world everyone would love each other unconditionally, there would be no war or famine and Barbie would have cellulite and be a size fourteen – but we don't live in that perfect world, just one where perfection is admired. So where does that leave us? Well, we are really no worse off than anyone else out there – because almost everyone has a part of their bodies that they would like to change and are constantly trying to disguise. It would be arrogant of us to think that we get the monopoly on body-image issues!

The people who enrich our lives accept that our surgery is a part of who we are, and they realise that although a stoma is a large part of an ileostomist's life, we still find time for the mundane things like football and chocolate!

Secrets, lies and excuses will only alienate the very person you wish to get closer to but, more often than not, they will love and respect you more for having a little faith in them.

Top Tips for Colonic Communication

- **Write a letter.** If you really feel that a face to face conversation would be too difficult, then compose a letter or email; but remember to explain why you feel that you couldn't tell them in person.
- **Don't put it off.** No relationship should be built on secrets.
- **Take your time** and explain fully – but remember that you have nothing to be ashamed of.
- **Feel comfortable** in your own skin – if you have accepted your surgery then it is easier for your partner to understand it. It is the people that love us who are there for support on the days when we don't feel quite so accepting as usual.

So the next time you find yourself inventing stories or planning to run away to Poland to escape 'the talk', save yourself the hassle of elaborate tales, the expense of thermal undies, and just *explain*. I can guarantee that telling the truth will not invoke evil spirits, turn your skin green or scar your partner for life. Talk to them. You'll be surprised.

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