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From impotence to intimacy : SB resident shares secrets of achieving new level of closeness

ELIZABETH HAMILTON, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

October 15, 2013 5:36 AM

In November 2011, at the age of 59, Santa Barbara resident Michael Russer was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Knowing his family's history of unsuccessfully battling the disease, he immediately asked his doctor to remove the tumor.

After a prostatectomy and seven weeks of daily, intensive radiation, what remains of Mr. Russer's tumor is no longer growing and he is an otherwise healthy and energetic man.

Except for one potentially ignominious problem: The surgery left him impotent.

Mr. Russer said the discovery was flabbergasting.

"I thought, 'You've got to be kidding me,' " Mr. Russer, now 61, told the News-Press on a recent afternoon over coffee at Coffee Cat in downtown Santa Barbara. "I had a harder time with that — as most men do — than the cancer itself, because in almost every society, the way a man typically defines himself is by his potency."

Mr. Russer, who was single at the time, wondered if he would ever have a romantic relationship again.

Then, in October 2012, nearly a year after the surgery, he met Jacky Lopez, a 48-year-old Brazilian immigrant. Within weeks, he was head over heels for her.

The inseparable couple would walk on the beach holding hands and hike the mountainous trails surrounding Santa Barbara. They would swap stories about the joys and struggles of their separate pasts or simply sit in restful silence. But Mr. Russer knew if the two were to survive as a couple, he would have to tell her. Everything.

"I remember it," Mr. Russer said of the tender moment. "It was a fall morning, the second or third week in October. She's sitting in my apartment and the sun's streaming in and I'm looking in her big, beautiful eyes. I said, 'This just ain't happening, and it may never happen. Are you willing to explore other ways of expressing intimacy?' "

He shook his head and smiled as if he still cannot believe it.

"She said, 'Absolutely.' "

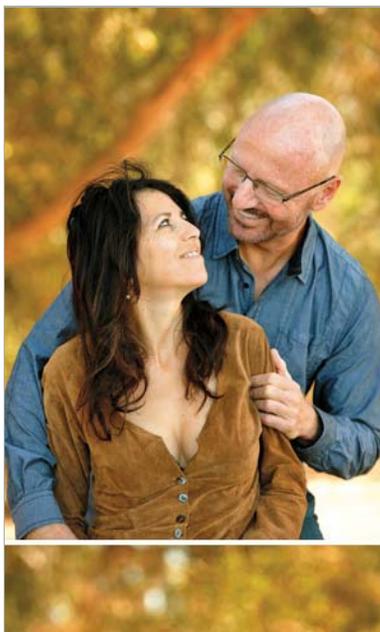
Even so, Mr. Russer was worried. With erectile dysfunction, could they have an intimate relationship?

As it turns out, yes, they could. In fact, as their relationship developed, Mr. Russer discovered his impotency not only contributed to the couple's ability to achieve intimacy, but it allowed them to experience levels of intimacy perhaps unreachable otherwise.



Michael Russer and his life partner, Jacky Lopez, often share romantic hikes at the Douglas Family Preserve.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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Mr. Russer will share his story and advice on intimacy at his upcoming talk, "Extraordinary Intimacy: A New Paradigm For Deep Emotional and Physical Intimacy," from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Oct. 22 at Center of the Heart, 487 N. Turnpike Road. The talk stems from his upcoming book, "Hardly Broken," which will be released in 2014. Tickets for the event cost \$15 pre-sale and \$20 general admission. Proceeds benefit the spiritual center.

Mr. Russer claims his impotency is the biggest blessing in his life and "if I were to get my function back, I would do everything in my power to not express it."

Why? Because his impotency allows him to short-circuit what he calls the biological and cultural intimacy inhibitors.

According to Mr. Russer, the biological urge men experience in intercourse is too "powerful and overwhelming" to allow for slow and mindful sex. A key to intimacy is consciously bestowing enjoyment on one's partner, something he says is impossible when the biological urge seizes control.

"That's why the typical act of intercourse lasts maybe 10 or 15 minutes, ended by the last grunt of the man, who rolls over and snores," Mr. Russer explained.

He insists this intimacy is paradoxically selfish, as both partners receive heightened enjoyment from altruistically giving to the other.

Cultural influences also erode men's desire for emotional connection, which form the foundation of intimacy, according to Mr. Russer. Television, radio and the "hook-up culture" insist that the physical element of sex is sufficient for intimacy, while connecting emotionally with one's partner is belittled.

"A lot of men have a problem with intimacy of any kind because we're taught culturally to be strong, closed-off, shut-down and produce or protect," he said. "A lot of men really crave being intimate on an emotional as well as physical level, but the culture is working against them."

Mr. Russer says intimacy requires the partners first be "heart open," a term he coined for vulnerability and indifference in sorrow and joy. Both verbal and nonverbal communication are key to being "heart open."

He and Ms. Lopez often practice nonverbal communication through synchronized breathing.

"We will just sit looking at each other and synchronizing our breathing. I would take her breath in and (release mine toward) her. And the breathing revs up and the energy gets stronger every time you do it ... It is a release of energy that is uncontrollable."

While Mr. Russer may sound like an Eastern mystic recommending rapturous spiritual exercises, he insists, "I'm not an airy-fairy kind of guy."

And he repeats it several times to be sure the point hits home.

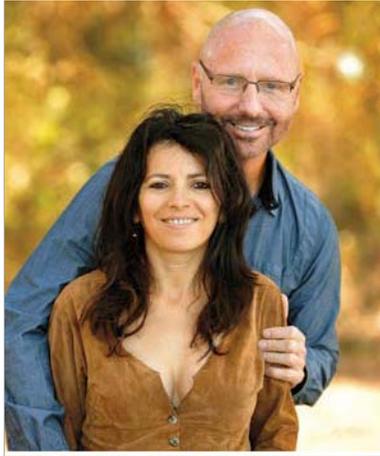
Mr. Russer hopes his book and discussion will help men regardless of whether they struggle with erectile dysfunction. Mostly, he wants to start a conversation.

"It's the biggest white elephant in our culture today," he said about erectile dysfunction. "No one talks about it. You can't have healing until we start talking about it."

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IF YOU GO

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Michael Russer says the impotence caused by his prostate cancer allowed him to achieve extraordinary intimacy with his life partner, Jacky Lopez.

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