

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

Shedding The Shame That Comes With Menses



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Here's a question for the women out there. Did you feel pride when you first began to menstruate — or was the experience tinged with guilt, shame or even disgust? Did you tell your parents, call a friend, or just hide it?

I'm not suggesting you should've set off firecrackers in celebratory glee — but when a woman officially “comes of age” it should be a happy occasion.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Like so many women, Betty-Sue, a 34-year-old married college admissions counselor, hates her period and everything associated with it (including sex). She never felt “normal” about her development. She got her period later than most of her friends — they were 12 or 13 and she was almost 15 years old. Because she was a competitive gymnast, her ovulation was suppressed. No one told her that many girl athletes have delayed maturation.

When Betty-Sue tried to talk with her mom, the wife of a Baptist preacher, she was told: “Be thankful the curse hasn't arrived yet, honey — it's a blessing.” So began her discomfort with her body and the sexual anxiety that haunts her.

According to research, if given the chance, about two-thirds of women would prefer to eliminate their periods entirely. It goes much further than biology. Negative messages about menstruation contribute to gender shame fueled by cultural mythology about female sexual functioning.

Enter Lybrel — an extended-use birth control pill that suppresses monthly periods. Unlike other oral contraceptive products that provide hormones for 21 out of the 28 days with a 7 day “break” when women may have a light period, Lybrel delivers hormones every day so women can choose to never bleed.

It makes sense that the pharmaceutical industry would seize an opportunity to promote empowerment and choice by freeing women from their monthly “obligation.”

Advertisements for this product promise that “Serving your sentence of menstruation no longer ends with a period.”

I had never equated menses with a prison sentence, had you?

But in this age of medicalization and engineered boobs and tushes and surgically enhanced labia, it follows that anything we wish for should be attainable.

Now women can turn their bodies off and on like faucets. No more worries about tampons interfering with your tennis tournament or bikini-clad island getaways. No more times of the month when genital sex is passed over as “too messy.” Now it's no muss and no fuss. And think of the money you'll save on pads and other sundries!

But freedom comes with a price. If you decide to mess with “mother nature” there are always risks. Do the math. Taking a birth control pill each day increases hormonal exposure — about 13 extra weeks a year. I'm especially concerned about all the young women who might fail to discover they're pregnant (without any bleeding) until the critical prenatal care period had passed. And while we're on the subject, don't forget to use a condom along with the pill as an extra measure of contraceptive safety and protection against HIV or STDs.

Whether you opt for menstrual preservation or suppression is your decision, but cultivating gender pride and sex-positive messages ought not to be a choice.

Since shame and anxiety are the antithesis of sexual pleasure — how we feel about our bodies (and what comes out of them) is critical to the development of healthy sexual expression. When we finally resolve our ambivalence about this natural event, we will be in a better position to handle the time when our periods come to an end — naturally.

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