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Gaining Menstrual Pride

by Heather Boerner



Nina Osegueda, 22, couldn't bear to talk to her mother about her period or sex as she was growing up. She bought tampons on the sly and was often fearful of bleeding through her clothes when she had her period. As a teen, she felt ashamed of her body — particularly of her vagina. But, at the same time, was desperate for male attention. The feelings of shame about her body and embarrassment about sex did not change when, at 19, she started a relationship. Now

that she was having sex, she often felt powerless.

"I didn't want to talk about sex," she says now. "But he did — all the time. Just to get him to shut up, I'd do whatever he wanted."

Osegueda's story may sound familiar to some — many women have felt menstrual shame and body shame and have felt powerless when it comes to sex. But is there a connection? That's the question at the heart of a recent study in the *Journal of Sex Research*. The study confirmed a connection between menstrual shame, body shame, and, for those who were sexually active, riskier sex. The good news is that the converse is also true — positive feelings about the menstrual cycle, vulva, and body in general are associated with more sexual assertiveness, more sexual experience, and less sexual risk.

Cycles of Shame

When a girl is ashamed of her period, often she is terrified of being seen with menstrual pads or tampons, or of menstrual blood leaking through her clothes. But menstrual shame is more than being embarrassed about one's period. It is the sense that a girl's period is dirty, and that the girl herself is dirty when she has her period.

For some girls, shame about their periods translates into greater shame about their bodies in general. And research has shown that body shame can have an impact on sex. One recent study by Dr. Laura Berman, director of the Berman Center in Chicago, a center for women's sexual health, found that girls who saw their vagina and/or vulva as dirty, smelly, or shameful had sex less often, and when they did, they didn't enjoy it as much.

Deborah Schooler, a researcher at San Francisco State University's Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality and the lead author of the *Journal of Sex Research* study, calls these "cycles of shame" — and makes the connection to sexual health very clear.

Schooler studied 199 female college students and found that women who were comfortable with their bodies, vulvas, and menstrual cycles were more likely to have sexual experiences — but also more likely to use condoms and to ask for what they want

in their intimate relationships. In comparison, women who reported that they were disgusted by their body and were ashamed of their periods either had little or no sexual experience, or, if they did have sex, they were less likely to advocate for themselves and less likely to use condoms.

Schooler points out that, until now, most research on teens and young women's sexuality assumed that less sex equals greater sexual health. Her findings question that. One of the compelling conclusions of her study is that while a high level of body shame often leads to less sex, it also leads to riskier sexual behavior. "Because of this," she says, "it seems important for health care providers to understand the reasons for a girl's abstinence and not assume that it's based on positive sexual decision-making."

Breaking the Cycle

Fortunately, many women who have struggled with menstrual shame, body shame, or poor sexual decision-making have learned to stop the cycles of shame. And breaking out of these cycles of shame can impact not just menstrual, genital, or body image, but many other aspects of a woman's life.

Osegueda began to break through some of her shame by developing more female friendships. As she grew closer to other women, she began to ask questions about her period and her body. She says she was pleased to discover that, despite her fears, she was "normal." With support and a growing appreciation of her body, she left her boyfriend and started dating someone new.

She says she is approaching her new relationship with increased sexual self-esteem. With her new boyfriend, she was more willing to talk about sex. They both discussed their sexual experience up-front. She started to initiate sex, and ask for what she wanted. With his help, she went to the gynecologist and discovered she had polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a common and painful reproductive hormone disorder in women, which she now successfully treats with hormonal birth control.

Jocelyn Neveaux, 26, of Minneapolis, traces her budding sexual and menstrual pride to exercising, losing weight, and getting more comfortable with her body. But she wasn't always that way.

"When I was younger, I'm not sure I separated my period from my body shame all that much," she says. "I was ashamed of my body as a whole. Maybe that's why I was ashamed of my period — just the bleeding and everything. I thought it was completely gross."

In college, however, Neveaux started reading VaginaPagina, a website where women post questions and information about their periods, reproductive systems, and sexual health. There, she learned about the DivaCup, a small, flexible plastic cup that catches menstrual blood, which can be used instead of a pad or tampon. It took her a year to work up the nerve to order one and start using it. "I really liked the concept — a product that is not only better for women's bodies, but better for the environment," she said. Since she got it, she said she's grown to love her period.

She also started going to the gym, where she got to see other women naked in the locker room. Neveaux said before that experience she had only seen airbrushed images of naked women in the media. Seeing women in the locker room made her realize that her body wasn't so different from theirs.

"I started doing Pilates and stuff," she says. "It's all about feeling your body, feeling the muscles in your core. And in experiencing my body, it helped me understand it. I saw, really, that my body had an intrinsic worth of its own."

Parenting and Sex Education

"Body shame can often reflect cultural upbringing," says Dr. Sheila Bolour, an assistant

clinical professor of Internal Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles, and an expert in women's health. "We're often not taught about our bodies before sex education is taught in schools. Many of the messages we get from our moms, our families, our society are that women are not sexual and sexuality is bad. Not only are we not taught about our bodies as we develop, but also female sexual expression is considered inappropriate."

Indeed, sex education may be the place where the cycles of shame can be broken — or stopped before they begin. Beverly Whipple, a sexuality expert and professor emeritus at Rutgers University, says that Schooler's study points to the danger of abstinence-only sex education programs. Parents can also play a vital role. Whipple says it's important for parents to teach girls positive body image before they start their periods if schools won't.

"This really speaks to the need for good comprehensive sexuality education and information about positive sexual health early," says Whipple. "We need to teach young women that they can feel good about their bodies, be in control of their bodies, and that they are responsible for their behavior — not just tell them to be abstinent until marriage."

Heather Boerner is a freelance health writer based in San Francisco, CA.

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