

IT HAS A NAME: VAGINISMUS





WEDDING BELL BLUES... AND OTHER FEARFUL FIRSTS

On a hot, Southern California evening in July, 1983, Theresa discovered that she couldn't have sex. It happened to be her wedding night. Hours earlier, the 26-year-old brunette had married the man of her dreams. They'd met at a dance and dated for just four months, but despite the quick courtship she knew that Bryan was the one. "He was fun, intelligent, kind," Theresa explained. "My dad always said, 'Watch the guy. If he treats his mother well, he'll treat you well, too.' Bryan is thoughtful," she said with a smile that could be heard in her voice. "Everybody likes him. I'm in love with him," she added with conviction, even now twenty-six anniversaries later.

The wedding was wonderful, Theresa remembered. She wore a white lace gown with a full train and veil, and carried a bouquet of roses and daisies. Over 150 guests watched the happy couple say, "I do." Theresa was a bride filled with excitement, "thrilled to be taking this new step."

Having been raised a Catholic influenced Theresa's decision to wait until she was married to have intercourse, although she had dated a lot of guys and had done "everything but," as she described her pre-marital sexual experiences. Now, as a newlywed, she looked forward to this special night with her husband. "I was expecting to finally experience what a lot of my girlfriends were talking about. I was looking for bells and whistles and the earth shaking. I expected to have a lot of fun."

After the wedding reception, the couple returned to Theresa's apartment, where Bryan had already moved in his belongings. They set

the mood for romance with soft music and candles. Theresa dabbed on some perfume and donned a sexy, white teddy—her “honeymoon teddy.” The foreplay was enjoyable, she said. Then they tried to have intercourse.

“I felt like I was going to implode if he put his penis in me,” Theresa described the sudden fear and panic that overcame her. “I felt like it was going to be awful. My body shut down. My mind was telling me, It’s going to be painful. You’re not big enough down there. Every time we tried to have sex my legs would clamp. I would get tense and anxious. It was like a flood of feelings. I didn’t know what to do.”

In many ways, the story of Theresa’s unhappy wedding night is the story of vaginismus itself, a condition characterized by an extreme fear of vaginal penetration, and involuntary, uncontrollable spasms of the vaginal muscles. In the most severe cases of vaginismus, the muscles clamp so tightly that sex is virtually impossible, despite the fact that these women have healthy, normal-size vaginas. “It’s like hitting a wall” is the way so many vaginismus sufferers describe their failed and all-too-frustrating attempts at intercourse. In fact, one patient reported that her husband’s penis was actually red and sore after so many attempts to get past this barrier.

In Theresa’s case, she and her husband continued to try to have sex, but the same thing kept happening. She was seized with anxiety and the “wall” remained as impenetrable as if it were made of bricks. The more the couple tried, the more frustrated and upset Theresa became, not knowing how to explain her reaction to Bryan, who at first seemed less concerned about the problem than his wife. “But I knew something was really wrong,” Theresa said. “I felt like a failure, like some kind of freak, who couldn’t do what seems to come so naturally to other women.”

“Isolated” is a word Theresa used to describe her feelings as a young bride who, for some unfathomable reason, couldn’t have sex with the man she loved. Who do you talk to about a problem like this? She agonized about this back then, and for many years to come. The three girlfriends she eventually told about her problem were supportive, but they didn’t have a clue. Even the many professionals she went to for help over the years—primary care physicians, gynecologists, hypnotists—couldn’t offer any answers. In fact, many doctors today, including both medical specialists in women’s health and sex therapists, are still unfamiliar with the term vaginismus, or lack the depth of understanding necessary to treat it effectively.

Yet as isolated as Theresa felt as a woman in an unconsummated marriage, she is hardly alone. While there is no definitive study related to the incidence of vaginismus, researchers estimate that as many as 1 to 7 percent of women across cultures suffer from this condition. What's more, women tend to under-report this problem, too embarrassed to divulge their "shameful secret" even to their doctors. This shroud of silence and isolation also extends to women who suffer from painful intercourse, or dyspareunia, which is estimated to effect from 3 to 43 percent of women.¹



"Where do I start? I wanted to wait to have sex until I got married, so I did not find out about my condition until our wedding night. It was awful. I went to so many doctors I even lost count, and all of them told me I was crazy and that it was in my head. I would go to specialists, psychologists, physical therapists, etc. I did this for almost three years. In the meantime, my intimate relationship with my husband was absolutely non-existent. He would not want to touch me in fear of hurting me. I felt useless as a woman; I wanted to make love to my husband but I just could not. The pain was so intense I would black out almost every time we would try. So after a couple of tries we just stopped trying."



Given the prevalence and complexity of vaginismus, it's no surprise that this condition is the leading cause of unconsummated marriages around the world. In my own practice, I have seen a number of patients who, like Theresa, discovered their inability to have intercourse on their wedding night. The particulars of their stories are as individual as the women themselves, yet they all share a common thread of frustration and suffering.

One patient who came to me reported that she "cries all the time." Another feels "emotional and useless." Many grieve over the children they never had, or may never be able to conceive. Often, vaginismus sufferers believe or are told that their problem is just a case of nerves. Then days become weeks and weeks became months and years, and still they are unable to consummate their relationships.

Are you Suffering from Vaginismus?

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-  Have fear and pain stopped you from having intercourse or any form of vaginal penetration?
-  Are you unable to use tampons, or feel like they won't fit?
-  Are you fearful of internal gynecological examinations? Do you experience trembling, sweating, or nausea in anticipation of an examination, or at the slightest touch near your vulvar area?
-  When you attempt intercourse, does it feel like your partner is hitting a wall?
-  Do you avoid any kind of intimacy, even kissing, in case it might lead to your partner wanting more?
-  Have your relationships suffered or ended because of your inability to relax with any form of penetration?
-  When you think about sex, do you find yourself asking, Why can't I do what seems to come so naturally to other women?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may be suffering from vaginismus, a condition characterized by the extreme fear of vaginal penetration. Regardless of how long you have had vaginismus, or how hopeless you may feel at this moment, know that your vaginismus can very likely be overcome. With the proper treatment, you not only can experience intercourse, but ultimately enjoy a fulfilling sex life.

For women who live with vaginismus every day, this is a condition that extends far beyond the bedroom walls. No matter whether the situation is romantic or medical, no matter how often they tell themselves to just relax, they react to vaginal penetration with fear and pain, sometimes even nausea and fainting. It's no wonder so many women with vaginismus refer to the condition as a "nightmare."

As I've said, my own experience treating vaginismus patients dates back only to 2005, a relatively short time frame given my thirty-year career as a physician and plastic surgeon. But I can honestly say that the stories shared by my vaginismus patients—their trials as they sought help, and their triumphs after treatment—count among the most moving patient interactions I've ever had the privilege to experience.

This chapter opened with the story of Theresa, a woman who struggled with vaginismus for twenty-six years. The condition robbed her of the opportunity to bear a child and broke up her marriage for a year, but she never stopped looking for a cure.

Six months ago, Theresa contacted me. After receiving Botox treatment, Theresa and her husband subsequently achieved pain-free penetration for the first time in their marriage. "This was amazing. I was overjoyed!" Theresa's emotion could be heard in her voice. Now, several months post-Botox treatment, the couple continues to navigate their way from intercourse to the joys of sex, a process that may take persistence and continued effort after so many years in a sexless marriage.

But when it comes to vaginismus, progress can be measured in increments as well as orgasms. So, in that regard, Theresa is already a success.

References

1. Schultz, W.W., Basson R., Binik Y., Eschenbach D., Wesselmann U. and J. Van Lankveld. "Women's sexual pain and its management." *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 2 (2005): 301-16