

A Female Sex Condition That Is Largely Unknown—and Very Treatable

If you're suffering, you're not alone.

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Marni Scott of Milwaukee, WI, married at age 22 after waiting to be intimate with her husband. Even though she had a healthy body image and was well informed about sex, their first night together did not go well. “I was in tears and in pain,” she says, describing the ordeal of consummation. Further sexual encounters were equally devastating. “I would hyperventilate, my body would shake, and I would frequently cry . . . this was obviously distressing, both to my husband and me.”

Marni tried desperately to get support, but her struggle continued. “I saw SO MANY therapists,” she exclaims. “Sex therapists, psychologists.” She was instructed to drink wine, asked if she really found her husband attractive, and advised that she must have suppressed memories of sexual abuse. At one point she was told, “You rushed into marriage, and if your husband doesn't get it from you, he'll look somewhere else.”

Finally, a gynecologist suggested she read a book called *A Private Pain* by Doctors Ditzka Katz and Ross Lynn Tabisel, which offers explanations, treatment options, and real patient stories for women suffering from vaginismus.

“I cried through the entire book!” Marni says. “I made my husband read it, and he had the same reaction.” She didn't know it at the time, but after eight months of marriage, he was considering divorce.

“Vaginismus.” If you don't know what that word means, you're not alone! My word processor's spell check doesn't recognize it. The word rhymes with “Christmas,” but otherwise it has nothing in common with the most wonderful time of the year. Some doctors can't identify it. And most women haven't heard of it.

Technically, vaginismus means the painful, involuntary contraction of the muscles in a woman's vagina, prompted by an attempt at penetration. For a woman who has it, though,

it can mean much more: humiliation when she can't endure a pap smear, confusion when she can't use a tampon, despair when she discovers she simply can't have sex without agony—or sometimes, at all.

Because there is so much shame surrounding the condition, the [exact number](#) of women afflicted with it is difficult to know and report. There is, however, growing awareness, and many women who have had vaginismus, like Marni, are often bravely sharing their stories in the hopes of helping other women. There are also growing treatment options for women, too.

Shortly after Marni and her husband read the book on vaginismus, she sent an email to the authors, Doctors Katz and Tabisel, who practice at the Women's Therapy Center in New York. Soon afterward, she began a weekly treatment program at their office. By her first wedding anniversary, she was cured. “We celebrated our anniversary the way our wedding night should have been,” she adds. Ten years later, the couple has four children.

Healing this multifaceted condition

“The biggest challenge during my journey was the shame I felt and the lack of understanding from people around me. I told myself after my cure that I would not let shame keep me quiet,” Marni explains. “I was going to talk and tell people so they never had to suffer in silence the way I did.”

Doctors Katz and Tabisel take a unique approach toward treating vaginismus that focuses on the mind-body connection at play—with great success. They emphasize that it's not just “all in her head.” Quite the contrary. “It's a true neurological wiring,” Dr. Katz says. She notes that a similar phenomenon is at play when someone gets a stiff neck due to stress or a nervous stomach while experiencing fear.

Carrie Wampler of Richmond, VA, was treated at the center in 2011 and benefited from this philosophy.

“For years, intercourse was excruciatingly painful, so I had to retrain my brain when I was receiving treatment to realize my body was designed to be able to have intercourse,” she explains. After discovering her condition on her honeymoon and embarking on a string of doctor visits and self-treatment efforts, she was relieved to find help.

“Vaginismus is not just a physical condition—the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical are all wrapped into one, and each need to be addressed,” she says.

Women can develop vaginismus at any age, but most are in their twenties or thirties when diagnosed. It can emerge after a difficult pregnancy or delivery, after she survives a sexual assault, or if she absorbs negative or fearful messages about sex from her community. In other cases, none of these risk factors seem to be present.

Thankfully, a wide variety of treatment options exist, often combining counseling with physical therapy. Other doctors use exposure therapy or even, in severe cases, Botox injections into the woman's pelvic floor muscles. The bottom line: with the right care, recovery rates from vaginismus are higher than 90 percent.

Above all, that's the message of hope Dr. Katz says a woman should hold onto if she finds herself suffering. "You're not alone. Don't give up, seek solutions! There's no reason to live like this."