

## From pain to pleasure

We all know love hurts but sometimes sex can too. We explore the impacts of painful penetration and the importance of discovering the things that bring you pleasure.

Words Ashleigh Hobson

**A**t 18 years old, only a couple of months into my first serious relationship, penetrative sex became painful for me. What began as an uncomfortable pinch over time turned into an unbearable burning, tearing-like sensation, which left me in tears. Sex became a monumental chore that I had to psych myself up for and allow days to recover from.

Despite my obvious agony, I was constantly pressured to perform and riddled with guilt any time I couldn't fulfil my partner's sexual needs. After a year of pushing through the pain for his benefit, I consulted a gynaecologist who handed me not one, but two diagnoses: vaginismus (the involuntary contraction of muscles around the opening of the vagina) and vulvodynia (pain of the vulva which has

no specific cause). I remember calling my boyfriend to tell him the verdict. "Sound's made up," he scoffed at me.

Needless to say, that relationship didn't last. What has stuck around, though, is the excruciating pain I feel from penetration and the dread that accompanies it. It's been a long eight years of bouncing around the healthcare system and being handballed from one specialist to another in search of a cure. I've been in sabotaging relationships for fear of having to do the deed regularly; fear of my partner becoming dissatisfied

with me eventually. It's been a long eight years of craving connections unbridled by doubt and anxiety.

It's an isolating experience but it turns out I'm not alone. According to Australian data, 20.3 per cent of women have experienced consistently painful sex. There are myriad possible causes: chronic stress, gut-health issues, medical conditions such as endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome. Often multiple causes contribute to the pain, which makes it difficult to diagnose and treat.

**The belief that “everything else” only counts as “sex” if it includes penetration is something that we all need to unlearn.**

This was the case for Emilie White\*, who decided to save her virginity until marriage. Years of hype and patiently waiting ended in bitter disappointment when she arrived at her honeymoon destination only to discover it was physically impossible to have sex. She was eventually diagnosed with both endometriosis and vulvodynia. The road to recovery for Emilie included painful surgery and months of pelvic-floor physiotherapy.

**Little problem, big issues**

A bit of pain with penetration may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but the reality is that it can impact a person's life in more ways than one. Emilie's marriage was not just under physical and emotional strain, her surgery left her nearly bankrupt. "It was a mountain of problems that continued to build up, one after the other," she recalls. "I was a wreck. I was in tears daily; I couldn't concentrate at work ... it just impacted everything else in my life and left me feeling like a failure."

These challenges can look different for singles. As if navigating the dating scene wasn't hard enough already, Lauren Herold's\* condition made it all the more difficult to spark and sustain a connection. She relied heavily on alcohol to pluck up the courage to go home with someone and even then she rarely felt positive about the experience. "I used to have one-night stands that would always end up with me being really uncomfortable ... people who want a one-night stand do have a fixed idea about how it's going to end."

**Limiting beliefs**

The idea that penetration is the "end goal" of sex is one we've inherited from our sex education, says pleasure coach Euphemia Russell. It's not hard to see why. Cast your mind back to your Year Six classroom watching crude cartoons about sperm madly racing for the egg on a wheel-out TV. It was all about penetration for the purpose of reproduction, taught with the assumption that sex always happens between a man with a penis and a woman with a vagina.

And it's not just in our sex education. It's everywhere — in the shows and movies we watch, the books we read, the conversations we have with our friends. "We didn't have sex, but we did everything else" is a comment I've heard thrown around many times. However, Euphemia says the belief that "everything else" only counts as "sex" if it includes penetration is something that we all need to unlearn.

**Communication is key**

Unlearning inherited beliefs about sex is something Lauren has managed to do. Once her condition had a name, everything changed. Instead of dreading sex and avoiding relationships, her vaginismus diagnosis empowered her to explore sex in new ways. "It made me realise that my experiences are more common than I think," she says. "And that it's not a barrier." Openly communicating with her sexual partners about what she enjoyed removed the anxiety she once felt when engaging in intimacy.

**Reclaim your sexual space with tips from the sexperts**

**1** Unlearning limiting beliefs is a key piece in the puzzle, but Euphemia notes that not everything you've learned may be "bad". Some key questions to consider are: **What have you inherited? Do you believe it? Does it actually suit you?**

**2** When it comes to exploring non-penetrative sex, Nadine encourages "consensual curiosity". It could include **sensual massage, erotic dance, sensory play, role play, mutual masturbation, breathwork ... the list goes on.** "Kink is actually amazingly accessible in many ways because it's very little about penetration and it's very little about genitals," agrees Euphemia.

**3** Open communication is vital and can be harder for singles. Nadine recommends doing some solo discovery until you feel comfortable engaging with a partner.

It seems Elvis had it all wrong; what we really need is a little more conversation before a little more action. Discussions about our desires and boundaries are crucial but often lacking during sex, according to sexologist Nadine Atia. "We need to have conversations about what we can and can't do before we have sex. And that's not seen in films, it's not seen in pornography enough and it's not seen in mainstream media."

**Pleasure is health**

Trying to untangle your sense of self-worth from society's web of sexual expectations is a tough gig. For some, it's easier to avoid sex altogether. But the experts agree that this process of unlearning, rediscovering your sexual self and inviting in pleasure is worth it.

Euphemia insists pleasure is a part of health. It boosts our immune system and connects us to our embodiment, which helps us to know ourselves a little deeper. "It's not just about having a good sex life," she says. "It's about how you feel truly autonomous and informed about the way you want to move through the world."

A lack of pleasure and disconnection from your sexual self can also cause a decline in mental health, adds Nadine.

She's right. I've had some dark moments over the years. I've been disappointed each time a new drug or form of therapy didn't turn out to be the magic cure. But I've come to terms with the fact that I may never find one, and I'm okay with that. I'm focused on exploring the things that make me feel good, rather than forcing the things that don't. I've learned a simple truth: there's more than one way to have sex.

*\*Some names have been changed for the privacy of individuals interviewed.*

**Ashleigh Hobson is a Melbourne-based freelance writer. When she's not traipsing the globe or hanging out with her cats, she writes about travel, health and lessons learned while stumbling through her 20s.**

Photography: Getty Images

