

The Healing of Vulvodynia from the Client's Perspective¹

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I have been a healthy girl my whole life. Growing up in a loving, dedicated family, I always ate home-cooked meals, went to bed at a reasonable time, and got plenty of exercise by playing with my family members and friends. I never once thought that at age 23, I might be at risk of undergoing vulvar surgery. There are many causes that contributed to the genesis of my vulvar pain, and many other factors that worsened such pain. Traditional medicine did not help me, and I did not find relief until I met Dr. Erik Peper, who taught me biofeedback. Through the many strategies I learned, such as visualization, diaphragmatic breathing techniques, diet tips, and skills to reframe my thoughts, I finally began to feel relief and hope. Practicing all these elements every day helped me overcome my physical pain and enjoy a normal life once again. Today, I do not have any vulvar discomfort. I am so grateful to Dr. Peper for the many skills he taught me, as I can enjoy my daily activities once again without experiencing pain. I have been given a second chance at loving life, and now, I have learned the techniques that will help me sustain a more balanced path for the rest of my life.

The next section describes the participant's interpretation of what she experienced and her perception for reasons for success. It consists of two categories: Triggers for illness and Triggers for healing.

Triggers for Illness

Not having a positive relationship with the doctor

The first factors that aggravated my pain was having a doctor with whom I did not have a good relationship. Although the vulvar specialist I was referred to had treated hundreds of women with vulvar vestibulitis, his methods were very traditional: medicine, low oxalate diet, ointments, and surgery. Whenever I left his office I would cry and feel like surgery was the only option. Vaginal surgery at 23 was one of the scariest and most unexpected thoughts my brain had ever considered. The doctor never thought of the impact that his words and treatment would have on my mental state.

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Depression

Being depressed also triggered more pain. Whenever I would have feelings of hopelessness and create irrational beliefs in my mind (“I will never get better,” “I will never have sex again,” “I am not a woman anymore”), my physical pain would rise. Having depression only triggered more depression and pain, and this became a vicious cycle. The depression deeply affected my relationships with my boyfriend, friends, family, and even my performance in my college classes.

Being sedentary

Being sedentary and not exercising also increased my pain. At first, I believed that the mere act of sitting down hurt me due to the direct pressure on the area, but after a few months I came to realize that it was inactivity itself that triggered pain. Perhaps because I would not let circulation do its course, but whenever I would sit for too long writing a paper or stay home all day because of my depression, my pain would rise. Still, if I am inactive most of the day I will feel lethargic and bloated. When I exercise, the pain goes away 100%. Exercise is almost magical.

Stress

Stress is the worst trigger for pain. Throughout my life, I always strived to be perfect in every way, meaning I stressed about the way I looked, performed in school, drove, etc. Through the sessions with Dr. Peper, I learned that my body was in perpetual stress and tightness, which induced pain in certain areas. My body’s way of releasing such tension was to send pain signals to my vulvar area, perhaps because of the recent yeast infection I had a couple months back. Still to this day, if I become very stressed I will feel pain or tightness in certain parts of my body, but now I have the strategies to perform proper stress-relieving techniques.

Processed foods

Junk food affects me in an instant way. If I eat processed foods for a week straight, I will feel groggy, bloated, lethargic, and in pain. Processed sugar, white flour, and salt are a few of the foods that make the pain rise. I used to love sugar, so every now and then I would enjoy the occasional milkshake and cheeseburger and feel mostly okay. However, in times of stress it became crucial for me to learn to refrain from any junk food, since it would worsen my vulvar pain and overall stress levels.

Menstruation

Menstruation is unavoidable, and unfortunately, it would always worsen my vulvar pain. Right about the time of my period, my sensitivity and pain would massively increase. Sometimes my pain would rise incredibly, and I would question myself: “What am I doing wrong?” And then, I would remember: “Oh yes, I am getting my period in a few days.” The whole area became very

sensitive and would get irritated easily. It became imperative to listen to my body and nurture myself especially around that time of the month.

Triggers for Healing

A good doctor

Just as I learned which factors trigger the pain, I also learned how to lessen it. The most important factor that helped me find true relief was meeting a good health professional (or healer, nurse, professor). The first time I met Dr. Peper and told him about my issues, he really listened, gave me positive feedback, and even made jokes with me. To this day we still have a friendship, which has really aided me in getting better. Contrary to the vulvar specialist, I would leave Dr. Peper's office feeling powerful, able to defeat vulvodynia, and truly happy. Just having this support from a professional (or a friend, boyfriend, relative) can make all the difference in the world. I don't know where I would be right now if I hadn't worked with Dr. Peper.

Positive thoughts and beliefs

Along with having a good support group, having positive thoughts and believing in a positive result helped me greatly. When I actually set my mind to feel "happy," and to believing that I was getting better, I began to really heal. After months of being depressed and feeling incomplete, when I began to practice mantras such as "I am healing," or "I am healthy," and "I am happy," my pain began to go away and I became able to reclaim my life.

Journaling

One of the ways in which "happiness" became easier to achieve was to journal every single day. I would write everything: from my secrets to what I ate, my pain levels, my goals for the day, and my symptoms. Writing down everything and knowing that no one would ever read it but me gave me relief, and my journal became my confidant. I still journal every day, and if I forget to write, the next day I will write twice as much. Now that writing has become a habit and a hobby, it is hard to imagine my life without that level of introspection.

Meditation

Although I would do yoga often, I would never sit and meditate. I began to use Dr. Peper's guided meditations as well Dr. Kabat-Zinn's CD (Peper et al, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Both of these meditations combined, whether on different days or on the same day, helped me focus on my breathing and relax my muscles and mind. Today, I meditate at least twenty minutes a day, and I feel that it helps me see life through a more willing and patient perspective. In addition, through meditation and deep breathing I have learned to control my pain levels, concentration, and awareness.

Imagery/Visualization

Imagery is a powerful tool that allowed me to heal faster. Dr. Peper instructed me to visualize how I wanted to feel and look. In addition, he suggested for me to draw and color how I was feeling at any given moment, my imagined healing process, and how I would look/feel after the healing process had traveled throughout my body. It is still amazing to me how much imagery helped me. Even visualizing here and there throughout the day helped. What I do now is I envision how I want to feel as a healthy woman, I take a deep breath, and as I breathe out I let my imagined healing process go through my body into all my tight areas along with the exhalation.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback is the single strategy that helped me the most. During my first session with Dr. Peper, he pointed out that my muscles were always contracted and stressed, and that I was not breathing diaphragmatically. As I learned how to take deep belly breaths, I began to feel the tight areas in my body loosen up. I started to practice controlled breathing twenty minutes everyday. Through biofeedback, my body and muscles became more relaxed, allowing circulation to take its course and ultimately reduce the vulvar pain.

Regular exercise/yoga

Exercising daily lessened my pain and improved the quality of my life greatly. When I first started experiencing significant vulvar pain, I stopped exercising because I felt that movement would aggravate the pain. To my surprise, it was the very opposite. Being sedentary increased the feelings of discomfort, while exercising released the tension. The exercise I found most helpful was yoga, because it is meditation in movement. I became so enthralled in my breathing and the poses that my brain did not have time to think about anything else. Every time after attending a yoga class, I felt like I could take on anything. Swimming, pilates, and gentle cardiovascular exercises have also helped me greatly in reducing stress and feeling great.

Sex

Although sex was impossible for almost a year due to the pain, it became doable and even enjoyable after implementing other relaxation strategies. When I first reintroduced sex back into my life, my partner at the time and I would go gently and stop if it hurt my vulvar area at all. Today, sex again is possible and joyful. Being able to engage in intercourse has boosted my self-esteem and helped me feel sexy again, which empowers me to keep practicing the relaxation techniques.

Listening to the Mind/Body Connection

The mind body connection is present in all of us, but I am fortunate enough to have a very strong connection. My thoughts influence my body almost instantly, which is why when I would get depressed my pain would increase, and when I would see Dr. Peper or believe in a good

outcome my pain would seriously decrease. Being aware of this connection is crucial, because it can help me or hurt me greatly. After a few months of practicing the relaxation strategies, I saw a different gynecologist and one dermatologist. Both professionals said that there was nothing wrong with my vulvar area—that maybe I just felt some irritation due to the medicines I had previously taken and my current stress. They said that there was no way I needed surgery. When I heard these opinions, I began to feel instantly better—thus proving that my thoughts (and even others' thoughts) affect my body in significant ways.

Although today I am 100% better, I still experience pain and tightness in my body if I invoke the “illness factors” I mentioned above. I still have to remember that feeling healthy and good is a process, not a result, and that even if I feel better one day that does not mean I can stop all my new healthy habits. To completely cure vulvodynia, I needed to change my life habits, perspective, and attitude towards the illness and life. I needed to make significant changes, and now my biggest challenge is to stick to those changes. **Biofeedback, imagery, meditation, good food, and exercise are not just treatments that I begin and end on a certain day, but rather they have become essential components of my life forever.**

My life with vulvodynia was ultimately a journey of introspection, decision-making, and life changing habits. I struggled with vulvar pain for over a year, and during that year I experienced severe symptoms, depression, and the loss of several friendships and relationships. I felt old, hopeless, useless, and powerless. When I began to practice biofeedback, relaxation techniques, journaling, visualization, a proper diet, and regular exercise, life took a turn for the better. Not only did my vulvar pain begin to lessen, but also the quality of my overall life improved and I regained the self-confidence I had lost. I became happy, hopeful, and proactive. Even though I practiced the relaxation strategies everyday the pain did not go away in a day or even a month. It took me several months of diligent practice to truly heal my vulvar pain. Even today, such practices have carried on to all areas of my life and now there is not a day when I do not meditate if even for five minutes. As paradoxical as it may seem, vulvodynia was a blessing in disguise. I believe that vulvodynia was my body's way of signaling to me that many areas of my life were in perpetual stress: my pelvic floor, my thoracic breathing, my romantic relationship at the time, etc. When I learned to let go and truly embrace my life, I began to feel relief. I became less irritable, and more patient and understanding, both with my body and the outside world. The greatest advice I can give a woman with vulvar symptoms or any person with chronic pain otherwise inexplicable is to apply the strategies that work for you and stick to them every day—even on the days when you want to go astray. When I started to focus on what my body needed to be nurtured and to live my life and do the things I truly wanted to do, I became free. Today, I live in a way that makes me find peace, serenity, pride, and fun. I live exactly the way I want to and I find the time to follow my passions. Vulvodynia, or any kind of chronic pain, does not define who we are. We define who we are.