



THE CYCLE

Breaking Stigmas & Unlocking the Benefits
of the Female Reproductive System with the
Sympto-thermal Method of Fertility Awareness

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the Sympto-thermal Method of Fertility
Awareness

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To all the women of the world.

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Social stigma is the extreme disapproval of (or discontent with) a person or group on socially characteristic grounds that are perceived, and serve to distinguish them, from other members of a society.

–Wikipedia

Whether or not we realize it, every woman has experienced social stigma related to menstruation at one time in her life. Menstrual stigma comes in all shapes and sizes, be it a young girl who is too embarrassed to tell her friends that she started her period, a woman's constant worry that she may experience a "leak" and reveal her menstrual status to everyone around her, or people casually making jokes about a woman's "time of the month" or "PMS" when she openly and unapologetically speaks her mind. None of us makes the conscious decision to ostracize or stigmatize menstruating women...at least I hope not. Menstruation is a natural occurrence that is central to the life and survival of our species, after all; and nearly every woman experiences it. But we are a product of our society, and society tells us that menstruation is something to be ashamed of and to hide. This may not be something most of us are ever explicitly told, but if we take a look—and not even a particularly close look—the messages are loud and clear.

Menstrual Ads and Commercials

Menstrual advertisements and commercials are quite possibly the biggest contributors to modern menstrual stigma. I know what

you're probably thinking: "Menstruation ads are everywhere! How could they possibly create stigma?" While it's true that television commercials, billboards, and other types of advertising are riddled with menstrual messages, they aren't the type of messages we should be sending or receiving.

The first big qualm I have with menstrual ads is the strange blue liquid we always see in tampon and pad commercials. *Watch as we pour this weird blue stuff on this pad to show you how absorbent it is!* What the heck is that, anyway? Maybe that stuff is accurate for Smurfette, but that's definitely not what *my* menstrual blood looks like! You may be grossed out by the thought of advertisers swapping the blue liquid for a red-tinged one instead. But let me ask you this: *what if the use of red liquid in ads was the norm?* We would probably find the notion of blue liquid to be completely and utterly ridiculous! Seeing a colored liquid in advertising that in no way resembles actual menstrual fluid subconsciously fills our minds with stigmas toward the female body. And young people are especially susceptible. When I was a kid, of course I remember seeing these ads, but I couldn't have begun guessing the purpose the products actually served. Perhaps I thought they were for cleaning.

Not only do ads *never* show anything that even slightly resembles blood, but I have yet to see an ad or commercial released by Tampax, Playtex, or Kotex that makes use of correct terminology. Words like "vagina", "menstruation", and "endometrium" (the scientific term for menstrual blood) are glaringly absent from product ads. And yet commercials and ads for products like adhesive bandages and antibiotic cream are riddled with bloody knees and scraped elbows. Beating around the bush about an event like menstruation that plays such a prominent role in women's lives isn't doing us any good.

I made a trip to the public library in search of some resources to use for this very book. I knew I wanted to find books or journal articles about menstruation, but I wasn't sure where to begin looking. Luckily, most

libraries come complete with a handy computer that informs you of the sections in which you'll find certain topics. As I was approaching said computer, a woman who worked at the library insisted on helping me with my computer search. Being that she had a lot more experience with this than myself, I happily accepted her help. She asked, "What topic are you searching for?" to which I replied "menstruation".

She looked at me a bit funny, which, at this point in the game, I was used to; people tend to get uncomfortable when this particular subject is mentioned. Then she asked, "That's a period, right? Like...what a woman gets?" Upon hearing this question, I figured that, like many people, maybe she was hoping she misheard me so she would be spared an uncomfortable conversation. "Yes ma'am, it is," I said. It wasn't until I saw her struggling to spell the word that I realized she had not misheard me. Sure, not everyone is great at spelling, but when I began chatting with her about the topic, it quickly became apparent how little she really knew about it. Eventually we got everything figured out, but I found myself extremely distraught by the fact that an adult woman had such a poor understanding of menstruation. But it wasn't her fault. In a society where it's beyond taboo merely to utter the word, it's no wonder so many know so little.

Another of the many problems with menstrual advertising is the way companies design and advertise their products. Advertising that calls a product "virtually undetectable" (Kotex)[1] or claims that the product is designed with a "discreet wrapper" to ensure "discreet protection" (Tampax)[2] is toxic. One of the only goals this sort of advertising achieves is making women feel as though

they must hide the fact that they are menstruating. *Plug it up, and don't you dare tell anyone about it.* Why is it made to be such an embarrassing thing? This doesn't make the menarche experience any easier for young girls. They are told that menstruation is a huge life event: "You're a woman now." And yet every message they see and hear tells them to do everything they possibly can to hide it.

It's impossible for children to escape these messages. Even though my mother described menstruation as a totally normal bodily function, it was not enough. Inevitably the messages got to me and, like many women, I grew up with a deep-seated disdain for my period.

Menstrual Products

The connection between menstrual products (like pads and tampons) and menstrual stigma may not be immediately apparent. It may seem ridiculous for me to suggest this, but the popularity of pads and tampons creates an internal stigma among women about their own bodies. Before you write me off as a *complete* nut, let's break this down a bit. Let's think about what a tampon is and how it works: a woman inserts this cotton-like material into her vagina using a cardboard or plastic applicator. It then absorbs all of her menstrual flow and is later removed and immediately discarded. Sounds pretty simple. The problem, though, is that when using these products, it is not necessary for a woman to have *any* physical contact with her vagina or her menstrual flow. Many may see this as a great advantage, but it makes women wary of their own menstrual blood, often citing it as "gross" or "unhygienic." I'm not suggesting that women go and play with their menstrual fluid, but even a change like switching from tampons to a menstrual cup completely changes the way a woman thinks about her period. I'm also not suggesting that we abandon pads and tampons altogether (because personal choice is wonderful), but I am suggesting that we should be conscious of the way these products are affecting the

way women think about their bodies. A society where tampon use is the norm—and where women, as a result, never come into contact with their fluid or their bodies during menstruation—is a society that perceives menstrual fluid as disgusting and menstruation as a taboo.

Using Lunette (or basically any menstrual cup) changes how women see their periods. With disposable products, blood stinks and doesn't look clean, but in a cup it's just blood with no special odor. When you realize that periods aren't dirty, it will change how you feel about them in general. When I started to use Lunette, I felt more connected to the divine inside of me and started to be more proud of being a woman.

—Heli Kurjanen, Lunette founder and owner

Hormonal Contraception and the Pill

I'll keep this section short since this topic will be discussed in detail in Part 4. I did feel that it was important to bring up, however, because the popularity of hormones has a much deeper negative affect than many of us realize. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that hormonal contraception and the pill are completely bad. They have impacted us hugely and absolutely have their place in our society, but the haphazardness with which many women put these artificial chemicals into their bodies—and the lack of forethought regarding potential long-term health implications—makes them dangerous. But that's not my point. The fact that these powerful medications are often advertised as a drug that will greatly reduce or eliminate monthly bleeding sends women the message that there is something innately wrong with their bodies that must be “fixed.” Although ads never say this outright, these messages are essentially telling women that, in its natural

state, the female body is an inconvenience. Menstruation is a huge inconvenience for many women—especially those who struggle with things like endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, or fibroids. I am incredibly well-acquainted with the constant longing for a “normal” period—or no period at all! This is the reality for so many women, and it’s a reality that often leads women to hormonal contraceptives. But hormones do not *fix* these underlying problems; they simply mask the symptoms. I know how easy it is to pop a pill once a day to make all of these problems “disappear,” and I also know how wonderful those benefits feel. But it’s important to realize that menstrual health is a reflection of overall health, and poor health often manifests as reproductive disorders. So instead of seeing bleeding as a thing to control and suppress, we must instead begin focusing on how menstruation fits into the picture of a woman’s overall health. Don’t worry, we’ll get to that soon.

Lady Parts Are “Unclean”

I could go on for days about this one, but I’ll keep it to a few examples that I find particularly impactful.

One of the most popular examples of women being told they need to clean themselves up “down there” is douching (and I’m not talking about the slang term we call someone when they’re being a jerk). For those unfamiliar with douching, it is the process of irrigating the vagina with a store-bought or homemade solution of various ingredients. Many women who douche do so after intercourse or after menstruation has ended as a way to get “clean.” Do not be led astray by this tomfoolery, friends! That these products exist at all sells the idea that women’s fluids and genitals are disgusting, but they can also cause a myriad of health problems. Douching has been linked to an increase in the risks of pelvic inflammatory disease or PID (which is an infection inside the uterus), ectopic pregnancy (a life-threatening condition that occurs when a fertilized egg attaches

to the inside of the fallopian tube instead of the uterus), and, disputably, cervical cancer [3,4]. The commercially available douches you see on store shelves are the biggest offenders as far as risk increases. Not only is douching a health hazard, but it is completely unnecessary! The vagina maintains an acidic environment for the sole purpose of keeping itself clean; it also harbors bacteria (the good kind) that help prevent infections. So no matter how tempted any ladies out there may feel to give your vagina a good rinse, steer clear!

Scented pads and tampons are also big culprits when it comes to making women feel unclean. Why do companies feel the need to inject perfumes and chemicals into a product that either sits *in* the vagina or snuggles right up against it? *Because vaginas are disgusting, of course!* Remember a few sentences ago when I mentioned that the vagina keeps itself clean...by housing good bacteria and staying nice and acidic? Perfumes and chemicals in scented pads and tampons disrupt this natural, healthy vaginal state, making it more prone to irritation and infection [5]. The walls of the vagina are also quite absorptive, which is why it's possible for women to use a contraceptive vaginal ring like Nuvaring that delivers hormones to the bloodstream by way of the vagina [6]. So it's pretty safe to assume that any chemicals placed into the vagina, whether via douches or tampons (even *unscented* tampons are riddled with chemicals), are going straight into the bloodstream.

Feminine wipes and washes are another contender. Not only do many of them contain chemicals and artificial fragrances, but their widespread advertising gives women the impression that they're in constant need of a "discreet way to freshen up" (Summer's Eve) [7]. After all this, it's no wonder that as an adult woman I am still self-conscious about the cleanliness of my privates.

Now we'll move on to a few examples that don't involve commercially available products but can make women feel unclean nonetheless. The Jewish laws of niddah are still practiced by many

today. Under these practices, a woman is to have no physical contact (sexual or otherwise) with her partner (including bed-sharing and passing objects from one another) from the beginning of menstruation until after her mikveh immersion; this time frame includes menstrual days (a minimum of five, even if her period is shorter) plus an additional seven clean days [8,9]. Several of the laws have been amended to take a more modern approach, including (1) the allowance of non-sexual contact limited to a “sign of affection socially acceptable between siblings,” (2) permission of relations after seven days have passed since the start of menstruation (assuming the woman is no longer bleeding), or, more conservatively, (3) allowing the seven clean days to begin as soon as menstruation has ended, even if bleeding lasted less than five days [10]. Mikveh—a Jewish ritual in which a person immerses oneself into a water bath as a way to achieve purity—must then be performed by the woman before she is permitted to once again engage in physical contact with her partner.

While I will absolutely *never* advocate that it is in any way wrong to practice any particular religion, I will say that practices like these performed in the traditional sense have the potential to intensify a woman’s feelings of shame and guilt about her healthy, functioning body. On the contrary, it can be argued that the laws of niddah and the mikveh are actually empowering by providing a woman the isolation needed to focus on her self during menstruation. Both sides of the fence can certainly be argued here, and it’s important to recognize the dichotomy.

The mikveh undoubtedly has misogynistic undertones—the idea of having to literally cleanse yourself after your period is insulting. Even though the physical act is performed for spiritual purity (rather than corporeal cleanliness), it still indicates that women are dirtier than men. The practice also cruelly defines who is a woman: a straight, menstruating wife. In making

menstruation the defining feature of femininity, the tradition ignores Jewish women who identify as queer or trans.

The practice could certainly be seen as sexist, but participating in the tradition is not necessarily an anti-feminist act; on the contrary, the mikveh can be a great example of power and community. In automatically labeling the practice as misogynistic, we assume oppression where there might be willingness and acceptance. Women may feel connected to their mothers and daughters through the custom, and can find spiritual clarity through the ritual. If we accuse mikveh-going women of blind obedience to a sexist tradition, we strip them of any agency—a sexist act itself. It's important to remember, too, that women must abstain from sex for two weeks prior to visiting the mikveh. Those two weeks can completely shift marital power dynamics, in that husbands can't assume marriage is synonymous with unlimited sexual access. The mikveh gives a woman personhood, in that sense, as it emphasizes that husbands don't have perpetual ownership of the female body.

In Newton, Massachusetts, there is a wonderful community center/mikveh, Mayyim Hayyim, that opens its doors to all Jewish women—Orthodox or not, trans, queer, single, pre-menstrual, post-menstrual, and women recovering from illness or addiction. Women who visit Mayyim Hayyim are encouraged to see the bath as a source of empowerment, and to use it on their own terms; while visitors can use the mikveh in the traditional way, they can also use it as a general action of healing. This modern mikveh creates a pro-woman

space where women at all stages of their reproductive lives are given room to connect to their religious customs. They're changing the way women engage with the practice, and are respecting tradition while embracing progressive attitudes.

—Molly Labell, Writer and Menstrual Activist

It's also important to note that Judaism is not the only religion to treat women differently during menstruation. Islam also calls for special "rules" to be adhered to during menstruation [11], and the same is true for many Dharmic religions. In today's society, where we rely so heavily on the hypersexualization of the female body, while at the same time ostracizing women for a perfectly natural bodily process like menstruation, we would be wise to take a lesson from the Mayyim Hayyim community center in Newton: the messages we send make all the difference.

The last example I'm going to share may sound a bit odd, but it highlights one of the many extremes of patriarchal societies. There is a myth stating that the mere touch of a menstruating woman will cause plants to wilt and die. The existence of such a myth undoubtedly shows that there is still much work to be done.

The examples I've discussed here are only a few of the many ways that society, religions, cultures, and corporations contribute to a woman's negative feelings about her body. After all of the negative messages constantly shoved in our faces and squeezed into our impressionable minds, I am honestly quite impressed that women manage to make it through the day without feeling completely and utterly repulsive! I hope this book will empower and inspire you to question everything you see and hear. Even the subtlest messages have an affect on both you and the women around you.

Everyone Loves a Little Math: Menstrual Math!

Just for fun, let's do a little math. I went to Georgia Tech, so I just can't help myself. I'll keep it short and try to make it interesting.

In a study published in *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment* in 2008, a group of researchers calculated the lifetime cumulative number of menstrual cycles among a group of 860 naturally postmenopausal Dutch women. They found that the median lifetime number of menstrual cycles experienced by the women in this study was 451.3 [12]. Of course, this number will be different for each woman depending on a number of factors, but let's assume all women have exactly 451.3 menstrual cycles throughout their reproductive years. Let us also assume—even though we know it's just not true—that every woman bleeds for exactly five days each cycle:

$$[(451.3 \text{ lifetime cycles}) \times (5 \text{ days per cycle})] / (365 \text{ days in a year}) = \mathbf{6.18 \text{ years}}$$

Did I lose you? What I just calculated for you is the *total* number of reproductive years a woman will spend menstruating! That's right, a woman who bleeds five days per cycle will spend more than six full years of her life shedding her uterine lining. This number jumps to nearly seven-and-a-half years for women who experience six days of bleeding and will be even higher for women who tend to bleed longer. You might be wondering why in the world you should care about this. My point is: **six years is a lot of time spent feeling dirty, unclean, embarrassed, ashamed, or ostracized for a completely natural bodily function.**

I've heard the question: "So what? Pooping is a natural bodily function. Should we also be advocating for people to be proud of their poop?" Honestly, it's a great question. However, there's a *big*

difference between menstruation and a number two. Yes, women may change a pad or tampon or empty a menstrual cup in the restroom; this is the same place where pooping takes place, as it turns out. So they're synonymous, right? Wrong. The key difference is that *a woman doesn't stop menstruating once she walks out of the bathroom*. It's not a one-stop deal. When a woman is menstruating, it's part of her life *all day for several days*. It's not just something she "takes care of" once or twice a day. So it shouldn't be treated the same way, especially since it occurs in many, many places outside of the loo.

It's about time periods got the respect they deserve. I'm not advocating for women to proclaim their love for their periods from a mountaintop. Nor am I advocating that women publicly announce when they are menstruating. However, casual conversations about menstruation should not be shameful, embarrassing, or hushed. It's about time we start treating the menstruating women in our lives just as we treat anyone else. Not sub-human; not lesser; not gross; not dirty. An excellent way to accomplish this is by learning about all the amazing and wonderful insights menstruation can provide us. The menstrual cycle is an incredibly powerful thing, and educating ourselves about its countless benefits will only improve our society.