

Toxic Shame and the Menstruating Body

Alegria Louise Demeestere

Antioch University

Toxic Shame and the Menstruating Body

When my sisters and I were growing up, there was an unspoken rule that we could not talk openly about menstruation in front of our father. If we were suffering from menstrual cramps, we used a euphemism to inform our parents: “My stomach hurts”.

I never challenged this until I was in my late twenties. I was practicing yoga by then, and learning to listen to and value my body. I had stopped taking painkillers during my period to mask the pain, and instead tuned in to what my body was doing and wanting. I made my period into a ritual and mini-vacation, and started to look forward to it every month as a time to rest and turn my focus entirely inwards. And if I needed to inform my father that I was menstruating, I told him directly: “I have my period” (which is technically still a euphemism) or “I’m bleeding.” My father always reacted by making a disgusted face and quickly interjecting: “No! I don’t want to hear about it!”. Alternatively he might yell, “I don’t need any details!” over his shoulder as he scurried to a safe place, away from his bleeding daughter.

Admittedly, the rebellious part of me relished in his hysterical reaction; but I also felt angry and, at the deepest level, hurt. I interpreted his reaction as a rejection of a fundamental part of my womanhood, as disgust towards a natural and healthy process that I have been experiencing for over twenty years. I wanted to shake him by the shoulders and yell, “Why do you fear my body so much?”

I myself don’t experience much shame around menstruation anymore, and I enjoy talking about it openly with men and women alike. I am on a personal mission to de-stigmatize menstruation, one conversation at a time. Every man I have a sexual relationship with comes away with a better understanding of menstruation and the female reproductive system— it is my parting gift! And as I look around me, it seems that there is more positive talk about

menstruation than in the past, at least in the American consumer world. For example, I see a lot of advertising for Thinx, the “underwear for people with periods”. Their ads neither glorify nor pathologize menstruation; they convey that it is a normal process for people who are biologically female, and that people experience menstruation in different ways.

Nonetheless, there is no denying that there remains a lot of stigma, disgust and fear in the world around the subject of menstruation. It is not a benign subject for most people and cultures, even though it is a process that a large part of the human population experiences. This attitude creates toxic shame that affects women and other people who menstruate.

Toxic shame is the sense of being flawed or defective as a human being (Bradshaw, 1988). We experience toxic shame when we evaluate ourselves relative to an internalized or cultural ideal and feel that we are falling short. We blame ourselves for our perceived inadequacy, feel worthless and powerless, and want to hide or disappear (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In this paper, I look at where the toxic shame of menstruation comes from. I outline its cultural roots, and how it is continually transmitted like an invisible, infectious disease through advertising and other messages. Next, I examine the effects of this toxic shame on women and their relationship to their bodies. Finally, I describe ways and attitudes that we can adopt both individually and as a culture, to heal from this toxic shame and have a positive relationship with the menstruating body.

I have chosen to focus on the shame of cisgender women and to leave aside the issue of shame of transgender men who menstruate and transgender women who don't menstruate, which each deserve entire papers of their own.

The Cultural Roots of Menstrual Shame

Anthropological studies find evidence of fear and disgust towards women's menstruation in many pre-industrial and religious cultures. The members of these cultures go to great lengths to avoid contamination from menstrual blood, which is thought to be a poisonous substance that can harm animals, plants, food and men. Menstruating women are considered to be impure during their period and are removed from the community, barred from religious ceremony, restricted from preparing food, and/or required to take ritual baths to purify themselves. In some tribal cultures women are required to stay in a menstrual hut for the duration of their period. Many religious cultures forbid men from having sexual relations with women during menstruation (Delaney, Lupton & Toth, 1976).

According to some psychoanalytic thinkers, men's fear and disgust towards menstruation is rooted in their castration anxiety as theorized by Freud (Manson, 1984). They see women as castrated men, who bleed from the part of their body where a penis would be. Alternatively, some theories suggest men fear the *vagina dentata*, the devouring vagina of the cannibalistic mother that has bitten the penis off, hence the blood (Gilmore, 2010). The sight of menstrual bleeding is said to trigger men's castration anxiety, and creating a taboo around it aims to lessen that anxiety.

Another reason for the menstrual taboo is that it validates cisgender male domination (Manson, 1984). The reasoning goes that because cisgender men cannot menstruate or conceive, they feel deficient and experience envy towards women. A menstrual taboo turns the situation around so that men are superior *because* they don't menstruate. Their deficiency becomes an asset and they can maintain their privileged position in the culture.

The misogyny underlying the menstrual taboo is an example of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001). There is both hostile antipathy and benevolent paternalism towards the

menstruating woman: she is portrayed as dangerous and angry on one hand, and fragile, ill and in need of protection on the other. Either way, the menstruating woman, like the pregnant woman, is viewed as being ruled by her body and emotions. From a judeo-christian perspective, this makes woman the inferior sex. The superior functions are the mind and the soul, which elevate humans above the status of animals, and those are the natural domain of men. Men are closer to God, while women are closer to animals. Normal biological functions like menstruation and childbirth are uncomfortable reminders that humans are corporeal creatures, and thus vulnerable to death. For these reasons, menstruation and by extension the female body must be concealed, controlled, and sanitized. Creating shame around menstruation, hiding or suppressing it, and expressing disgust when it is exposed are all attempts to “civilize” woman (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power & Pyszczynski, 2002).

In print and television advertisements for menstrual products, we never see menstrual blood. Despite the fact that we often see red blood in movies and television shows, menstrual blood is represented by an inoffensive blue fluid. We never see a tampon being inserted or pulled out, or even the inside of a bathroom in these ads. Women are often depicted dressed in tight, white clothing, ostensibly to reassure the consumer that her period will remain completely concealed, invisible: there will be no tell-tale bulge or embarrassing leakage. The consumer will not have to bear the discomfort of being reminded of their corporeality. Many advertisements for menstrual products don't even show female bodies, even though female bodies are used to sell all sorts of products— cars for example— that are not specifically related to the female body (Stein & Kim, 2009; Erchull, 2013).

These advertisements go so far as to suggest that the menstruating body is the opposite of the feminine ideal. Even though regular menstruation is a sign of health, advertising messages

convey that the truly feminine woman keeps her menstruation out of sight, thus staying “fresh” and “confident”, and experiences no bloating or fatigue. She must remain pure, clean and deodorized. She is inevitably young, thin, white and able to play sports and go to the beach with her friends while menstruating (Merskin, 1999; Erchull, 2013).

Shame around menstruation is perpetuated through other mediums including jokes and “humorous” greeting cards and refrigerator magnets that portray menstruating women as emotionally labile, irrational, out-of-control and physically or mentally ill due to their “raging hormones”. Meanwhile, educational booklets produced by menstrual product manufacturers for young women emphasize the negative aspects of menstruation, including cramps, moodiness and the potential for embarrassing leaks (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

Menstrual stigma is transmitted more indirectly through silence. Many American adults agree that menstruation should not be openly discussed, and certainly not around men or boys or with the family at home. It should be reserved for special, one-to-one, private talks between mother and daughter, and only when necessary. This conveys once again the notion that menstruation should be hidden. When it is talked about, it is through euphemisms: “that time of the month”, “Aunt Flo”, “feminine protection” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

The Psychological Impact of Menstrual Shame

It is important for us to open our eyes to all the ways that our culture stigmatizes menstruation and shames women for menstruating, because it has profound consequences on the psychological health of women, their relationship with themselves and their sense of self-worth.

In patriarchal Western cultures, women’s bodies are objectified. A woman is a body that is constantly being observed and evaluated and that is valued only to the extent it is useful to others, for example for pleasing men. Over time, woman has internalized the observer’s

perspective on her, viewing herself as an object to be appreciated by them. This self-objectification leads to self-policing, i.e the habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance. The dominant culture encourages self-policing, as physically attractive, desirable women are rewarded with popularity, opportunities for dating and marriage, better treatment in professional and social situations, social mobility, power and wealth. Menstruation, like breastfeeding, interferes with our cultural concept of women as objects of desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Research shows that the more a woman self-objectifies, the more likely she is to have a negative relationship, marked by disgust and shame, towards her menstrual cycle (Roberts, 2004). The more a woman engages in self-surveillance, the more likely she is to opt for suppression of her monthly period using synthetic hormones (Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt & Wilcox-Constantine, 2007).

A woman's relationship to her menstrual cycle affects her relationship to her own sexuality. Research suggests that women who have more comfortable and accepting attitudes towards menstruation are more likely to feel comfortable with their sexuality (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003). They are more comfortable with their bodies, more sexually assertive, more sexually experienced, and take less sexual risks. They are also more likely to have intercourse while menstruating. On the other hand, women who feel higher levels of shame about menstruation report more sexual risk-taking than those who have less menstrual shame (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, Caruthers, 2005).

Healing our Relationship With the Menstruating Body

Despite the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation, periods are talked about quite a lot in the consumer world. There are tampon ads on television, period underwear ads in the New

York City subway, and a flourishing industry of period-positive products. Menstruation has been commodified. Though this certainly helps to normalize menstruation and decrease its secrecy, it is not a true discussion of menstruation, but an incentive to shop (Kissling, 2006 as cited in Strange, 2007). Cultural discourses around menstruation and the effects they have on both men and women remain unexamined and thus continue to operate behind the scenes while women are blamed for having low self-worth and antagonistic relationships with their bodies.

To heal from menstrual shame and develop a healthy relationship with the menstruating body, it is crucial to talk about menstruation— with health care providers, with therapists, with mothers, sisters and loved ones. By talking about it, we can become aware of the cultural stigma, debunk myths, discuss feelings of shame and body loathing, and teach and learn different ways to manage menstruation (Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt & Wilcox-Constantine, 2007). These discussions can be online: it is encouraging to note that American adolescent girls already use online spaces to have open, frank dialogues about menstruation, to ask questions and to validate each others' experiences (Polak, 2006 as cited in Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

By cultivating and communicating a positive view of menstruation, we gradually dismantle the pervasive, patriarchal, negative view. Menstruating women can reframe their experience of menstruation and question the negative cultural attitudes towards menstruation so that they no longer see it as a disorder but a natural part of their lives. They can thus reclaim their bodies and choose which measures of self-care they need and want to practice when menstruating. They can create art and rituals around menstruation. They can share their personal experience and stories around menstruation with other women.

The point is not necessarily to be “loud and proud” about periods (Kissling, 2006 as cited in Strange, 2007) or to be provocative. What matters is that each woman relate to menstruation

on her own terms. Menstruation is assumed to be painful, debilitating and inconvenient for all women, and for some it truly is. But menstruation can also be seen as a sign of good health and functioning reproductive organs, a reassuring indicator for some women that they are not pregnant, an energetic release, an opportunity to rest and take care of oneself, a time to connect and listen to one's body, a monthly goddess ritual (Stein & Kim, 2009)... There are as many ways to approach menstruation as there are women. May we all work together to replace cultural menstrual shame with self-acceptance, self-worth and true appreciation for our unadorned, real, bodily selves (Roberts, 2004).

References

- Bradshaw, J. (1988). *Healing the shame that binds you*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Chrisler, J. C., & Caplan, P. (2002). The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde: How PMS became a cultural phenomenon and a psychiatric disorder. *Annual Review Of Sex Research, 13*(274-306).
- Chrisler, J. C., & Johnston-Robledo, I. (2002). Raging hormones?: Feminist perspectives on premenstrual syndrome and postpartum depression. In M. Ballou, L. S. Brown, M. Ballou, L. S. Brown (Eds.) , *Rethinking mental health and disorder: Feminist perspectives* (pp. 174-197). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- Delaney, J., Lupton, M., & Toth, E. (1976). *The curse : A cultural history of menstruation* (1st ed. ed., Sunrise book). New York: Dutton.
- Erchull, M. J. (2013). Distancing through objectification? Depictions of women's bodies in menstrual product advertisements. *Sex Roles, 68*(1-2), 32-40.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly, 21*(2), 173-206.
- Gilmore, D. (2010). *Misogyny : The male malady* (EBL-Schweitzer). Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2001). An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications of gender inequality. *American Psychologist, 56*, 109–118.
- Johnston-Robledo, I., & Chrisler, J. C. (2013). The menstrual mark: Menstruation as social stigma. *Sex Roles, 68*(1-2), 9-18.
- Johnston-Robledo, I., Sheffield, K., Voigt, J., & Wilcox-Constantine, J. (2007). Reproductive shame: Self-objectification and young women's attitudes toward their reproductive functioning. *Women & Health, 46*(1), 25-39.
- Kissling, E. (2006). *Capitalizing on the curse : The business of menstruation*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.

- Manson, W. C. (1984). Desire and danger: A reconsideration of menstrual taboos. *Journal Of Psychoanalytic Anthropology*, 7(3), 241-255.
- Merskin, D. (1999). Adolescence, advertising, and the ideology of menstruation. *Sex Roles*, 40(11-12), 941-957.
- Polak, M. (2006). It's a gURL thing: Community versus commodity in girl-focused netspace. In D. Buckingham, R. Willett, D. Buckingham, R. Willett (Eds.) , *Digital generations: Children, young people, and new media* (pp. 177-191). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Rempel, J. K., & Baumgartner, B. (2003). The relationship between attitudes towards menstruation and sexual attitudes, desires, and behavior in women. *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 32(2),
- Roberts, T., Goldenberg, J. L., Power, C., & Pyszczynski, T. (2002). 'Feminine protection': The effects of menstruation on attitudes towards women. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 26(2), 131-139.
- Roberts, T. (2004). Female Trouble: The Menstrual Self-Evaluation Scale And Women's Self-Objectification. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, 28(1), 22-26.
- Schooler, D., Ward, L. M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. S. (2005). Cycles of shame: Menstrual shame, body shame, and sexual decision-making. *Journal Of Sex Research*, 42(4), 324-334.
- Stein, E., & Kim, S. (2009). *Flow : The cultural story of menstruation* (1st ed. ed.). New York: St. Martin's Griffin.