

As appearing in

# NVA News

Volume XVII, Issue II Fall 2012

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## Understanding Sex Therapy for Vulvodynia

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Many women who experience pain with sexual activity (“sexual pain”) need specialized treatment, but aren’t sure who to turn to or what treatment may involve. Sex therapy, in coordination with other treatments, may be a vital component of a comprehensive regimen for sexual pain. This article discusses what women can expect when consulting sex therapists.

Vulvodynia is a difficult condition to live with. There are few medical problems that have such a profound impact on how women feel about themselves. A woman’s anticipation of sexual pain often leads to worry and anxiety – experiences that run counter to enjoying sexual activity. For others, months or years of living with chronic pain make it difficult for them to enter into or maintain positive, intimate physical connections with their partners. Some feel a loss of their “sexual self.”

A single woman with vulvodynia can feel particularly isolated and alone, and may be reluctant to disclose her condition, even to those who are closest to her. For example, I’ve had young clients who’ve been greatly distressed

when friends or relatives suggest that they may have been sexually abused, which is usually not the case, after sharing their situation. A single woman may experience fear before discussing her condition with a new partner. A sex therapist can be proactive in helping a woman navigate these challenging conversations.

Often, men don’t realize that their partners with vulvodynia may worry excessively about their sexual relationships. In fact, a man may assume that his partner’s avoidance of sexual activity indicates a lack of interest in or concern about him and/or their sexual relationship. Men who come to treatment with their partners tend to be very loving and supportive, but simply don’t know how to help their partners or their relationships. Therapy helps to educate men about sexual pain problems, and they are usually relieved and satisfied when therapists give them specific action steps to improve their relationships. There is a saying in sex therapy, “The problem may be with one person, but the solution is with the couple.” Men certainly bring their own sexual histories, attitudes and life experiences to therapy. Therapists can help men

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with their side of the equation, as well as how they respond and react to difficult situations. My experience has been that men have a great ability to be patient and supportive when they see their partners taking steps to improve their physical and emotional health.

Longstanding sexual pain may cause a woman to fear opening up and dealing directly with this issue. Some couples are able to improve their sexual relationships on their own. The NVA's online tutorial, *Everything You Need to Know about Vulvodynia*, available at <http://LearnPatient.NVA.org>, has many helpful suggestions, but for many couples, trying to deal with sexual pain on their own can prove too difficult and leave them feeling even more frustrated and defeated. These feelings are typically a sign that professional help is needed.

Perhaps a woman has gone to individual or couples counseling in the past and isn't sure how more counseling will help her to improve her situation with sexual pain. It is important to understand that sex therapy, which is another form of talk therapy, involves a different approach that is highly specific and directed.

### **Finding a Therapist**

Sex therapists come from several different professional disciplines, including clinical social work, clinical psychology and psychiatry. A woman can get assistance in finding a local sex therapist by asking her gynecologist or primary care provider for a referral, or by visiting the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT) website, [www.AASECT.org](http://www.AASECT.org), and clicking on "Locate a Professional." Ideally, a good sex therapist has basic training in psychotherapy, specialized training in sexuality, which usually involves

some combination of academic and supervised clinical work, and a commitment to learning about and treating vulvodynia.

When calling prospective therapists, a woman should feel free to ask about credentials and licensing, including specific subspecialty training and the length of time treating vulvodynia patients. She should also inquire about fees and whether treatment will be covered by her health insurance. A woman should keep in mind that the first sex therapist she visits may not end up being the best match. Although feeling uncomfortable at first is common, it may also signal a poor match. Many women, however, are actually relieved to have found their way to sex therapy and don't have these concerns.

### **The First Session**

To begin, a sex therapist will take a detailed history to better understand how a woman's medical history, family background and previous experiences may contribute to her current situation. It is important for a therapist to understand what the woman has done to date, both on her own and with her partner, to attempt to deal with sexual pain, as well as how she is managing in the present.

### **The Therapy Process**

After taking a sexual history, it's important to establish appropriate and realistic goals. This involves helping the woman clarify her understanding of the problem and decide on the outcomes she'd like to work towards. Sex therapy is nonjudgmental and therapists will not tell women what kind of sex life they should have or what their outcomes should be. Typical goals of sex therapy for many women with vulvodynia include managing expectations, identifying methods to reduce pain and increase enjoyment,

improving communication, resolving conflicts and resentments that have built up over time and helping women change their attitudes towards themselves as sexual beings.

Sex therapy is more directive than regular psychotherapy, meaning that therapists often guide women (and their partners) into discussions of specific issues, including current sexual activity, physical and emotional responses to sex and sexual fears, among others. Homework assignments may also be given. If something feels too difficult or “not right,” a woman should communicate this to her therapist. The more honest a woman is, the more helpful her therapist can be.

### **Therapy Approaches**

Sex therapists utilize an array of treatment modalities and approaches. A few examples include mindfulness, sensate focus and continuing education. Mindfulness can help a woman focus on the present moment and decrease anxiety related to thinking about the past and the future. This redirects the woman from such distracting thoughts and enables her to better focus on appreciating physical sensations in the present moment. Sensate focus, a series of exercises that helps a woman get back in touch with her senses, is often a part of treatment. It's designed to decrease a woman's anxiety and pressure and increase relaxation, comfort and emotional connection with her partner. Sensate focus is not directed toward a specific goal such as intercourse or orgasm, and usually involves temporarily suspending intercourse. Sex therapy also involves continuing education. Learning more about sexual anatomy and physiology, through discussion and reading assignments, helps to separate sexual myths from reality and give couples new insight.

### **Collaborative Care**

Effective sex therapy usually includes referral to, and evaluation by, other professionals who can, as a team, help to support women through the process. Sex therapists should have colleagues to whom they routinely refer patients to rule out or treat other conditions that may be causing sexual pain or limiting sexual activity. This includes experts in gynecology, physical therapy, neurology/anesthesiology, psychiatry and psychopharmacology, among others. Ongoing collaboration between the sex therapist and other professionals treating/supporting a woman as she undergoes sex therapy can be invaluable.

### **Getting Started**

No matter where a woman with vulvodynia is in her lifecycle, sex therapy can be helpful. A word to the wise about timing – many couples wait until they want to conceive to start therapy. It's best for couples to allow for sufficient time for therapy to help them develop a more satisfying sexual relationship before taking on the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth and caring for an infant. It's important for a woman to remember that consulting a sex therapist does not mean she has a bad relationship – it's something that couples who have loving relationships do to deal with specific problems and bring more happiness to their lives. Sex therapy can sometimes prove to be more challenging than a woman expects. It takes courage to address vulvodynia's impact, but many women and couples who've gone to therapy experience more satisfying sex lives and relationships. Taking care of ourselves and our relationships is an investment worth making. If sexual pain is an issue for you, there's no time like the present to seek the help you need.