

Erotica Menu

Suggestions for Exploring Intimacy Without Pain

Vulvar and vulvovaginal pain affect each woman and her sexuality differently.

Some of you have not been able to feel or behave sexually for some time, and you may fear that you have lost your ability to do so. Part of your recovery from your pain is to (re)build your sexual and relationship confidence. We therefore encourage you to consider the kinds of relationship activities and ideas below as part of your treatment for your vulvar symptoms.

Vaginal and penetrative intercourse is only one way of being sexual. And, although it is the behavior that most of us consider to be “having sex,” it is often not the most sexually gratifying activity for women. When you have vulvar pain, intercourse can become impossible. Although facing this can be difficult, it can also be an excellent opportunity for women and couples to find out what else they might like to do together that can help them to restore and/or maintain sexual and physical intimacy in their relationship. And for those of you not in relationships, it can be a time to learn a lot about what your own body enjoys and desires.

In the spirit of exploration and pleasure enhancement for you and your partner (if you have one), we offer the following “menu.” Some of these activities are genitally/sexually focused, others are not. Please use them as guides and experiments. The list is not exhaustive and we encourage you to use the books, websites and other resources contained in these suggestions in order to further your own sexual research.

Although the sections are presented chronologically, this does not mean that you need to work through them in a linear fashion. You can choose things from any section, even from the “genital intimacy” list, right away. The point of the menu is for you to feel like you have lots to choose from—because you DO. We hope that using the menu can help you to come to believe this as enthusiastically as we do.

Good luck and enjoy!!



Non-Sexual Ideas for Intimacy

Try to remember that “intimacy” is not exclusively sexual. For many couples whose sexual lives have been disrupted by pain, both physical closeness and intimate conversation can feel threatening. Each partner may have their own understandable reasons for not wanting to get “too close.” The following suggestions are some ways to remind yourselves that closeness can and does extend beyond the bedroom. We hope you can come up with other ideas that easily fit into your lives, as well as some that might challenge your comfort zones about what it means to be physically together.

Do something physical together—exercise, a house project, garden, fix the car. Make separate lists of the kinds of activities that could fall into this category. Share them and collaborate on a mutual list—pick one activity per week to engage in together.

Read to each other. Find romantic, or even sexual, poetry or prose, or just read an article from today’s newspaper. Serialize a novel and take turns with the installments. The point is to be physically close and mentally connected. Talk about what you’ve read. Do this in bed at night or on the weekends, or just snuggling on the sofa.

Take a **class in a foreign language** (or get a book, or learn online). Learn how to say “I love you,” “Thank you,” and “You are important to me” in another language. Practice this with your partner frequently. Don’t forget how to say it in your first language.

Go on dates with each other. Pretend you are dating someone new and try to act really interesting to the other person. Ask them questions about things you don’t usually talk about; their work, for example, or their family tree. Tell each other stories about your childhoods, maybe even about what you believed about love and relationships.

A few resources for this activity include:

- *Guide to Great Dates*, by Paul Joannides and Toni Johnson
- *All About Me and All About Us*, by Philipp Keel
- *The Book of Questions and The Book of Questions: Love and Sex*, by Gregory Stock

Cook a meal together. Really together. Do the planning, shopping, preparing and cleaning up together (or at least divide them up fairly). Be silly—feed each other while you cook, and especially while you eat. Do not skip dessert.

Some resources for this:

- *Intercourses: An Aphrodisiac Cookbook*, by Martha Hopkins and Randall Lockridge
- *Seduction and Spice: 130 Recipes for Romance*, by Rudolf Sodamin

Take the afternoon or morning off and do things you don’t normally get to do. Go out to breakfast, or to lunch. Shop or see a matinee. Buy each other popcorn. **Get off work early** and have a happy hour date together.

Change your environment for a day/night/weekend. Without sexual expectations, spend the

night in the city if you live in the country; go camping if you live in the city. Be open to what happens.

Call in the middle of the day and make **spontaneous lunch plans**. Or call a few days early and make a date. Give each other time together that is different from what you have gotten used to. Try to find and appreciate the newness in these experiences.

If one of you is musically talented, **play or sing** for your partner. Entertain each other with your talents, natural or cultivated. Go to karaoke and sing a love song for your partner.

Talk with each other.

Read things aloud: a wide variety of genres—romance novels, erotica, hard core pornography, medical textbooks, self-help books. Practice saying and listening to a variety of terms for sex, sexual behaviors, your and your partner's genitals, and other body parts that you think you are not comfortable discussing. Pay attention to how this feels, what you like and don't like to say and to hear. See if this is something you might want to work into your sexual activity. A nice DVD (that contains explicit heterosexual and lesbian sex) to accompany or guide this activity is:

- *Talk to Me Baby: A Lover's Guide to Dirty Talk and Role Play*, by Shar Rednour.

And a book:

- *The Fine Art of Erotic Talk: How to Entice, Excite and Enchant Your Lover with Words*, by Bonnie Gabriel

Visit a sex shop, online or in person, with your partner. Walk around the store together and look at the items for sale. Talk with each other about whether they are exciting to you or not. Or walk around separately and each person bring something that arouses them back to the other person. Or do the same thing online. Explore products, books etc. that you might not normally be drawn to. See how the products make you feel—whether they are frightening, exciting, silly, or neutral. Ask your partner questions about why certain products turn them on or off. Decide beforehand if the goal is to purchase something, or simply to explore and talk. Also decide if this activity is meant to be followed by a sexual and/or genital encounter. Time your visit accordingly.

In Portland, you can visit:

- **It's My Pleasure**, 3106 NE 64th St.

On the web, try:

- **Good Vibrations** @ www.goodvibes.com
- **Toys in Babeland** @ www.babeland.com
- **Eve's Garden** @ www.evesgarden.com
- **The Sinclair Intimacy Institute** @ www.bettersex.com

Redefine what closeness and intimacy and pleasure can mean.

Physical, but Non-Genital, Intimacy

The following suggestions involve more bodily closeness and touching than do the previous activities. Some couples may feel like they need extra support in their lives before they are ready to take some of this on, particularly if the pain has caused significant conflict and/or fear. Sexual counseling and/or physical therapy are two ways of enlisting this support, although they are certainly not necessary for every couple. If you have avoided this kind of touching for some time, however, it is important to check in with each other from time to time as you engage in this work. You might try developing your own catch phrases to use with this list, such as “I’m not feeling like I can have genital contact right now, but I really want to connect with you. Let’s try _____ instead.”

Take a bath together. Or separately. Have your partner stay dressed (or you do) and wash the bather’s back etc. Talk about your days, or talk about how it feels to have your back washed. Or don’t talk at all. But be there with and for each other.

Attend to a body part that your partner really loves to have touched. Brush their hair, for example. Shave or moisturize some part of them that they like to be smooth and soft. If you don’t know what parts these are, it’s a good time to start asking and learning.

Have your partner **paint your toenails**. Pick the color together.

Have a **meal together in bed**. Include a movie or a story.

Learn about **massage**, but don’t get intimidated by the idea of full-body massage. Become expert in massaging the body part that your partner loves best—head, hands, feet, neck. Experiment with techniques and learn by trial and error. And/or use one of these great books as a guide:

- *Sensual Massage for Couples*, by Gordon Inkeles and Greg Peterson
- *The Complete Book of Massage*, by Clare Maxwell-Hudson
- *The Complete Guide to Massage: A Step-by-Step Approach to Total Body Relaxation*, by Susan Mumford

Take a shower together. Find products and toys that help you to touch and explore each other’s bodies—loofahs and differently textured washcloths, for example. Think about changing your showerhead so you can manipulate the direction and pressure of the water. See if you can distinguish between sensation that feels good and sensation that feels sexual (see “sensate focus” below). Notice this and develop different pathways for each. Look at each other if that feels comfortable and tell your partner what you like and appreciate about their body. This part can be taken out of the shower as well.

Learn and practice **sensate focus** and physical relaxation. The purpose of this technique, which was developed by Masters and Johnson 35 years ago, is to explore the physical and pleasurable sensations of the non-genital parts of your bodies from a variety of stimuli (feathers, fabric, latex, leather etc.) without trying to reach orgasm. Find the time and the space to try this—it can take some people/couples up to 30 minutes to allow themselves to relax and focus enough to learn

from this technique. Give yourselves this time. You can search “sensate focus” on the web—there are many sites that define and explain the general technique. Some excellent, and more detailed, resources to learn more about sensate focus are:

- **For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality**, by Lonnie Barbach
- **Sensate Focus, Parts I-IV** (videos), available from the Sinclair Intimacy Institute (www.bettersex.com)

Lay together in bed. There are numerous ways to do this. Try it with the lights on and include looking at each other, or turn them off and focus on how each other's body feels. Pay attention to how your partner's skin feels under your hands—notice the different textures of skin, hair etc. Or change the focus by staying purposefully silent—notice what kinds of things you can hear when you stop talking and purposefully listen. Although this sounds simple, this exercise might require some couples to find the time to do it. It will require both people to go to bed early, for example, or stay in bed late. Or even find the time in the middle of the day to give this exercise some attention.

Stand in front of a mirror together and face your bodies. You can include conversation, or you can do this silently. Either way, you can talk about how it felt to do this afterwards.

Use these and other techniques to identify your **erogenous zones**. These are the parts of our bodies that are extra-sensitive (in a good way!) to touch. The genitals, breasts and mouth are erogenous zones for most people, but each of us have our own unique pleasure maps that may be related to previous pleasurable body experiences—it might be your back, your cheek, your toes, your palms or your teeth. You can use your knowledge of these personal erotic places to both enhance and replace genital sexual contact.

Initiate/extend your foreplay. If you have decided that you can be genitally sexual together, make plans to do so. And then use the preceding 24-48 hours (or even the preceding week if that's appropriate) to prepare and spread out the pleasure of being genitally together. Attend to your body in the ways that you like, and take pleasure in these very acts—washing your hair or moisturizing your skin. Imagine your partner's appreciation of these parts of your body later. Think about whether you might want to wear special clothes and then spend time shopping for these, imagining what will make you both happy. Or go through your closets, find something special, and handwash it. **CONNECT** these activities with what you are planning to do with your partner later. Buy candles if these give you pleasure, choose the kind of music or sounds you might like to have playing when you are together.

Write each other notes about what you are hoping you will be doing together and use email or places in your house to get them to each other. **Savor the anticipation** as another way of expressing and experiencing intimacy.

Experiment with **phone sex**. By not being physically together, you may feel less threatened by what your partner may or may not expect from you; you may not feel obligated to “follow through” with genital intercourse. You can try reading something erotic over the phone if this is new and/or uncomfortable for you. You may or may not want to touch yourselves while you do this—it is not a requirement.

A resource for this is:

- *Phone Sex: Aural Thrills and Oral Skills*, by Miranda Austin

Play verbal sex games. Narrate your favorite sexual fantasy to your partner, and vice versa. Agree on the rules beforehand, e.g. whether stories are meant to lead to something physical or not (and if they are, see the following sections for suggestions). For those of you who are new and/or uncomfortable with this, try writing your fantasy down first. And then read it out loud to your partner. Or keep it in writing and send it to them in the form of a love letter or sexy email. A guide you might like to look at is:

- **Couples Guide to Erotic Games**, by G Schoenwolf
(see section called “Games for Depressed Couples”)

Genital and Sexual Intimacy

See the introduction to the last section. These activities are likely to raise the same concerns for couples that are having difficulty (re)connecting sexually, and may require the same kinds of outside support and/or resources.

Masturbation

For some people, this is an excellent place to start. There is a lot to say about masturbation, and we encourage you to consult with the resources below if masturbating is a new sexual experience for you. Although this may not be true for each woman, it is likely that **learning how to please yourself** with touch will enhance your ability to feel pleasure with your partner. We encourage you to spend time exploring your own feelings and reactions about touching your own genitals as you work on your genital pain.

You can masturbate alone or in the presence of your partner. You can do this together or sequentially (see “Mutual Masturbation,” below). You can **watch the other person**, they can tell you what they are doing and why it feels good to them. It is not unusual for the woman in a couple to have masturbated less than her partner—it might be a good idea for a couple to spend a little more time and effort on establishing some balance. Some women with vulvar pain will not be able to masturbate comfortably. We encourage you to try things one step at a time, using **liquid lidocaine** if that helps.

Some EXCELLENT resources for women are:

- *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality*, Lonnie Barbach
- *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving*, by Betty Dodson
- *Tickle Your Fancy: A Woman's Guide to Sexual Self-Pleasure*, by Sadie Allison
- *Becoming Orgasmic*, by Julia Heiman
- *The Woman's Book of Orgasm: A Guide to the Ultimate Sexual Pleasure*, by Tara Barker
- *First Person Sexual: Women and Men Write About Self-Pleasuring*, Edited by Joani Blank

For those of you who want to try a video, two places to start are:

- *Celebrating Orgasm: Women's Private Self-loving Sessions*, Betty Dodson, PhD
- *Nina Hartley's Guide to Masturbation*, Nina Hartley
- (Videos/DVD's are available at **It's My Pleasure**, and at the websites listed below. Amazon.com is also a great source for books and videos).

Some women might want to **experiment with vibrators** while they learn about or alter their masturbation patterns. Again, pain may or may not influence this decision, and you should use both lidocaine and your lubricant of choice as needed. For women who are using dilators, a vibrator can be a natural extension of this work—many vibrators are similarly sized and shaped. The vibrating sensation, however, offers additional sensation that you may want to eventually add into sex with your partner. You can experiment with using your vibrator with your dilator (using the vibrator on your clitoris or labia), and/or using your vibrator with your partner. There is almost too much to say about vibrators and sex toys in the small space here, but two good resources are:

- *Good Vibrations: New Complete Guide to Vibrators*, by Joani Blank with Ann Whidden
- *Toygasms: The Insider's Guide to Sex Toys*, by Sadie Allison
- *The Many Joys of Sex Toys: The Ultimate How-To Handbook for Couples and Singles*, by Anne Semans

Some excellent websites from which you can learn more about, and purchase, vibrators (and other helpful stuff!):

- www.goodvibes.com
- www.babeland.com
- www.evesgarden.com

For those of you who might want to talk to someone in person, or who might want an in-person shopping experience, Portland has a wonderful, and woman-owned, bookstore and sex shop called **It's My Pleasure**. Located at 3106 NE 64th St. It's My Pleasure not only has a very knowledgeable staff and a wide variety of vibrators, dildos, and dilators, but they also offer a class called "Sex Toys 101" for \$10. Call them at 503 280-8080.

Masturbation can be enhanced by a good understanding of genital anatomy, that is, how your genitals are put together. Some excellent resources that can help you to better understand the specifics of your sexual body are:

- *A New View of a Woman's Body*, by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers
- *The Clitoral Truth: The Secret World at Your Fingertips*, by Rebecca Chalker
- *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century* (any edition), The Boston Women's Health Book Collective

Two interesting books that do not provide instruction, but offer beautiful and informative images:

- *The Cunt Coloring Book*, by Tee Corinne
- *Femalia*, by Joani Blank

Mutual Masturbation and Genital Massage

The distinction between masturbation and genital massage is probably a fine one, but genital massage might be seen as a transition from self-pleasuring to including your partner in the experience. Genital massage can be done by each person (to the other) and can be a nice opportunity to experiment with lubricants, natural oils (olive, almond etc), aloe vera juice (remember—all of these are edible!!) You can use massage as a way to learn about your partner's body, and vice versa, and can use sensate focus techniques to delay orgasm. You can also use this as another opportunity to talk with your partner about how it feels to be touched. Some (video) guides that might help you to get started are:

- *The Best of Vulva Massage: An Anthology of Erotic Touch*, Joseph Kramer
- *Fire in the Valley: Female Genital Massage*, Annie Sprinkle and Joseph Kramer

Nipple work

Both women and men often have a lot of erotic sensation in their nipples. If you and your partner don't already know this about each other, practice with touching, licking, biting, oils, and other products that might taste or feel good. You can also explore online sites or stores such as **It's My Pleasure** for products that are designed specifically to enhance nipple sensation and pleasure.

Oral Sex

Cunnilingus (oral sex performed on a woman) and **fellatio** (oral sex performed on a man) are very important sources of sexual gratification for many couples, with and without pain. In fact, many couples dealing with vulvar pain have come to rely heavily on oral sex as their primary expression of physical intimacy. This is sometimes complicated, however, by continued feelings of frustration that this type of sexual activity isn't "real sex." We encourage you to experiment with oral sex as an act in itself, rather than as a stepping stone to the "real thing." Many people, particularly women, find enormous pleasure in receiving oral sex when they and their partner give it the attention it deserves.

Again, for women, this may require some further knowledge and exploration about what feels best for you, and your vulvar pain may or may not interfere with this. Use lidocaine as needed to find out more about what is tolerable, and then ask your partner to use their mouth and tongue to gently explore what might be pleasurable. If this is new for you, or even if it's been a sexual staple for some time, try talking about this kind of sex together, or try changing your routines by renting a video or buying a book that focuses on oral sex. Change something to make it new, like keeping your eyes open, or doing it somewhere other than your bed. Some great resources to start are:

- *Ultimate Guide to Cunnilingus: How to Go Down on a Woman and Give her Exquisite Pleasure*, by Violet Blue
- *The Low Down on Going Down : How to Give Her Mind-Blowing Oral Sex*, by Marcy Michaels and Marie Desalle.

- *Box Lunch: The Layperson's Guide to Cunnilingus*, by Diana Cage
- *She Comes First: The Thinking Man's Guide to Pleasuring a Woman*, by Ian Kerner

And for video fans:

- *Nina Hartley's Guide to Better Cunnilingus*, by Nina Hartley
- *The Complete Guide to Oral Lovemaking*, by Patti Britton

Anal Sex

Like oral sex, anal sex is a part of many couples' regular sexual activity, even those without pain. And, like oral sex, it is what some couples with pain have turned to as their alternative to vaginal penetration.

Anal sex can be very pleasurable for many women, but this is not the case with everyone. We encourage you to pursue this carefully so that you can make the best-informed choice about whether you want to include this in your own sexual activity. Without the appropriate preparation, lubrication and/or foreplay, anal sex can be uncomfortable, unpleasant or painful. With the right resources, however, and good communication between partners, many couples and women have found this to be a wonderful addition to vaginal penetrative intercourse. Look to these guides for a start, and ALWAYS USE LUBRICATION!

- *Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, by Tristan Taormino.
- *Anal Massage for Relaxation and Pleasure*, by Carol Queen and Robert Lawrence
- *Anal Pleasure and Health: A Guide for Men and Women*, by Jack Morin

Anal penetration need not be limited to women and homosexual men. Many heterosexual men enjoy being anally stimulated/penetrated as well, and this is something that couples dealing with vulvar pain may wish to explore. A male (or female) partner may enjoy being stimulated by your tongue, your finger(s), a dilator, vibrator or other sex toy (plug, beads), or a strap-on dildo. Again, we encourage you to pursue this carefully, with guidance, good communication, and as always, good lubrication. The websites that we have included here, many of the books, and Portland's own **It's My Pleasure** are all excellent sites through which to explore this dimension of your sexualities—you can browse products that are designed specifically for anal stimulation, as well as hear more from couples who have included this in their lovemaking. Some resources specific to strap-on sex include:

- *The Ultimate Guide to Strap On Sex: A Complete Guide for Women and Men*, by Karlyn Lotney

DVD's/videos you might want to explore:

- *Bend Over Boyfriend and Bend Over Boyfriend 2*, directed by Shar Rednour

Pain

Your pain is uniquely your own, and genital or vulvar pain can be uniquely challenging for many women and couples. There are a number of books that deal with chronic pain, some of which include information about sexuality.

Although not specific to vulvar pain, these resources may help you to think about your pain in some non-sexual ways, as well as provide you with some everyday ways to cope with all the issues that surround chronic pain. For starters, try:

- *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: For All of Us who Live with Disabilities, Chronic Pain and Illness*, by Cory Silverburg (see especially the chapter on pain).
- *The Chronic Pain Control Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide for Coping With and Overcoming Pain*, by Ellen Mohr Catalano and Kimeron Hardin
- *The V-Book: A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health*, by Elizabeth Stewart and Paula Spencer (includes some information about pain and sex).
- *Sex Over 50*, by Joel Block (with Susan Crain Bakos)
- *Still Doing It: Women and Men Over 60 Write about their Sexuality*, Edited by Joani Blank (these last two contain some information about pain and aging).

Recovery/Abuse Issues

For those of you whose pain is accompanied by, or related to, a previously abusive or traumatic sexual past, there will be extra challenges to coping with your pain. We recommend that you talk with a counselor or other professional support person about these issues (if you haven't already). There are hundreds of resources available to survivors of sexual violence and abuse and we suggest that you talk either with your counselor or your provider if you need some help navigating through them, or finding the right direction to take at this time. A few resources that we can recommend are:

- *The Survivor's Guide to Sex: How to Have an Empowered Sex Life After Child Sexual Abuse*, by Staci Haines
- *Ghosts in the Bedroom*, by Wendy Maltz

General

There are many many ways to explore both your and your partner's sexuality. We have broken down some of the more commonly explored activities, as well as some of the issues that present specifically for women and couples with pain, but this list is extremely partial. We URGE you to start your own exploration here, and to add to the list of suggestions with your own alternatives, both old and new. Don't forget sexual fantasy, tantric sex, and good old-fashioned making out and groping.

Almost everything in this list can be expanded upon, and all the books, DVDs and videos are available at the websites that have been listed; we encourage you to explore these sites and

bookstores on your own. Amazon.com and local favorite Powell's (www.powells.com) are also excellent resources. With just a little effort, you will find scores of more books and videos that address sex and sexuality at more general levels, as well as lots of other specialty areas and topics that we have not dealt with here.

Good Luck!!

The Program in Vulvar Health
OHSU Center for Women's Health
Oregon Health and Sciences University

Other websites:

- Portland sexuality resources (Society for Human Sexuality)
www.sexuality.org/portland/html
- University of California at Santa Barbara "SexInfo"
<http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/index.php>
- The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction
www.indiana.edu/~kinsey/
- The Sinclair Intimacy Institute
www.bettersex.com