

Together couples address challenges associated with vulvar pain disorder

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Vulvar vestibulitis syndrome (vvs), a vulvar pain disorder, affects approximately 15 percent of women. A new study in the journal *Family Process* reviews the experiences of couples in which the woman has a diagnosis of vvs and explores coping strategies that aid in the subsequent emotional, relational, and sexual challenges. There is no known cause or decisive treatment.

Researchers including Jennifer J. Connor, PhD, LMFT, Bean Robinson, PhD, LP, LMFT, and Liz Wieling, PhD, LMFT, interviewed thirteen heterosexual couples. The study investigated how both partners developed shared meaning about vvs through their experiences, observations, and conversations with each other.

The study found that both women and men identified their sexual relationship as bearing the largest burden from vvs, highlighting the importance of treating the couple, not just the woman.

Eight respondents reported experiencing tension in their intimate relationship, especially prior to receiving a vvs diagnosis. However, the diagnosis helped remove doubts, distrust, and blame, and helped couples communicate more positively and develop a mutual understanding of the syndrome.

These couples stressed mutual support and acceptance as well as alternatives to intimacy that did not involve vaginal intercourse. All couples adapted their sexual lives to cope with pain, and they developed

an emotional bond by going through these experiences together.

The couples' communication led them to develop a shared sense of meaning about vvs, allowing women to share feelings of guilt and men to develop identities as supportive partners. The researchers found that as men learned more about vvs and how it affected their partner, that knowledge helped them recognize that their partner was not rejecting them personally.

"Encouraging couples to discuss their stories and experiences with medical professionals on their path towards arriving at an accurate diagnosis of vvs can be an important part of therapy," Connor notes. "We hope our research provides physicians and therapists with useful strategies enabling them to provide interventions that are respectful, supportive, and helpful to couples with vvs."

Source: Wiley

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