

Menstruation involves complex everyday routines

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Menstruating can be more emotionally taxing and difficult than it needs to be. This is according to new research from the University of Gothenburg, showing that many carry a double burden when

menstruating.

In her [doctoral thesis](#), Josefin Persdotter explores everyday routines associated with menstruation, focusing especially on notions of cleanliness and "dirtiness."

"I have looked at the conceptualization of what I refer to as 'menstrual dirt'. How menstruation is defined, both symbolically and concretely, as something filthy; but also what practical and emotional impact this has on the menstruating person."

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with people who menstruate, diaries, commercials, forum discussion boards, instructions, along with a quantitative and qualitative survey with 445 respondents. The results show that a significant portion of the respondents experience a negative [emotional impact](#) during menstruation, due to anxiousness or shame about not being able to conceal the menstruation from others, or due to the fear of germs.

"Menstruating often comes with clearly stigma effects, and feelings of disgust are often directed towards one's own body. At the same time, many of the study subjects personally resist such taboos and stigmas around menstruation in various ways. For the majority, however, the practical care of their menstrual hygiene is still a close-kept secret," says Persdotter.

In her thesis, she explores the pad and the menstrual cup, two different hygiene products that she refers to as "menstruation technologies." Her results indicate that these technologies reinforce negative values associated with menstruation. At the same time, both of them, and perhaps the menstrual cup in particular, make it possible to resist prevalent norms.

Bleeding in combination with anxiety make for a double burden

Persdotter describes how everyday routines and technologies defined as unclean when it comes to menstruation relate to dirtiness very much in the symbolic sense.

"Many people in our part of the world are skeptical to taboos relating to menstruation found in other countries, and they are appalled by the oppressive approach other cultures may take to menstruation. But are these really so essentially different from Swedish practices and notions surrounding menstruation? I would argue that our relationship with menstruation is often strikingly similar."

She describes menstruation in Sweden as something characterized by ideas, technologies and acts that in one way or another create taboos and stigmas. Participants in her study have for example said that if they go hiking or camping, it is common for one person to carry the group's collective waste, but that used menstrual products will be carried separately by the menstruating person. Other participants express how many people around them, especially young men, find it completely unacceptable to touch or even look at someone else's used pad. When it comes to the menstrual cup, it is described as 'disgusting' to boil it in a pot that is also used for food.

"My thesis shows that many keep to, in my mind, unnecessarily complicated routines when it comes to menstrual hygiene. For most people, these are everyday things that you 'just do,' but in fact they are done again and again, and many of them are inefficient and time-consuming. Several of the study participants feel that they are physically unclean when menstruating, and describe concerns that they might smell bad, despite changing their sanitary product and showering frequently.

The fact that bleeding is combined with social anxiousness means that the menstruating person is carrying a double burden."

Persdotter's research aims to increase the understanding of what effects our views of [menstruation](#) can have.

"In my thesis, I wanted to make visible things that we take for granted, and question why potentially problematic ideas and rituals live on. But I also wanted to show how technology and design play an essential role. Sanitary products, but our toilets too, could be developed to make things easier for the menstruating person. I hope to contribute to making menstruating people's lives better and easier."

More information: Thesis: gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/70567

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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