

Evaluating Female Sexual Pain

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Insertion of an object penis or finger into the vagina is part of the sexual experience of many women. However, between 8-22% of women worldwide experience pain when they engage in this type of sexual activity. This can have significant negative effects on their sexual satisfaction and quality of life. From a clinician's perspective, asking about and assessing a patient's sexual pain can help them diagnose and treat underlying health issues - it is an essential part of providing adequate care. But despite this symptom being so important, sexual pain has been famously termed the "neglected symptom" in healthcare. Why? Both patients and clinicians can feel embarrassed when talking about sex, which doesn't make it easy for the patient to talk about painful sex and doesn't make it easy for the clinician to treat it.

So I started thinking of ways to ease this communication – something that would make this communication more accessible. I found that there were no appropriate tools available that could do this.

My thesis project aims to create a questionnaire that can assess the whole picture of sexual pain, including everything that a patient would want their clinician to know, and that a clinician wants to know from their patient.

I created questions for the questionnaire using prior research. Then I brought together a team of patients, researchers, gynecologists and psychiatrists, and asked them to revise all of the questions I made and add in questions that they thought were missing. Collaborating with this diverse team made sure our questions were relevant for both the patient and clinician. Not only did we create questions relating to the physical features of pain (location, timing, quality), we also created questions relating to how pain impacts people's behaviour, thought processes, feelings, and sexuality.

Then we tested the questionnaire by running individual interviews and focus groups with 18 patients who are currently living with sexual pain. And our results were very positive; these patients found that the questionnaire was sensitive to their experience, comprehensive, understandable, and appropriately formatted.

In the future, we plan to conduct further testing to check the validity and reliability of the measure.

Overall, this questionnaire used patient and clinician collaboration to create a health tool that is useful for all parties. It can now be used to gain a deeper understanding of patient's sexual pain that may not have otherwise happened.

I hope this presentation has shown you how important patient collaboration is in the area of healthcare and health research and maybe even prompt you to have a conversation about your own sexual health with your clinician.