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MOVING ON

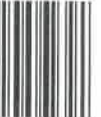
NEW LOVE FOR KIM AND KANYE – BUT AS USUAL IT'S COMPLICATED



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S EVEN years into her marriage, sex still wasn't getting any easier. Instead of it being a wonderful and intimate experience, it was painful and difficult. As much as she tried, she just couldn't relax and enjoy it.

The emotional and physical torment of vaginismus is real, says Anneri Nielsen of Somerset West, near Cape Town, and she believes it contributed to the breakdown of her marriage.

Vaginismus is a condition where the muscles of the vagina involuntarily spasm, making penetrative sex extremely painful or even impossible. It's a condition that shows just how strong the connection is between mind and body.

Anneri was a virgin on her wedding day. Although she hadn't been raised in a very strict religious family, she decided to wait for marriage before having sex.

"People were proud of us for 'doing the right thing'," Anneri (32) says. "But it's really hard to shake off all your inhibitions and guilt overnight and to suddenly no longer view sex as dirty and 'sinful'."

Her experience of sex, on her wedding night and all the way through her marriage, was extremely painful. Her ex-husband was patient and never forced her, she says, but because she was expecting it to be painful, she believes the muscle spasm was her body's way of protecting itself from penetration.

"If you then force it, the cycle intensifies. Next time there's more pain, more fear, more frustration – which spills over into other aspects of your relationship.

"Though there were many other factors which led to the divorce, I believe vaginismus was part of it."

Anneri now belongs to a vaginismus



SEX IS JUST TOO PAINFUL

support group and says she's realised religious convictions or religious upbringing often play a role in the condition.

She struggled with feelings of impurity and constantly had to remind herself that she's allowed to enjoy sex without feeling guilty. "It's years of conditioning you have to force yourself through," she says.

Even gynaecological check-ups have been problematic for her as doctors struggle to insert a speculum, with some of them becoming frustrated. Anneri says even some people in the medical profession don't understand the condition.

She nevertheless became pregnant and has a four-year-old daughter. "Despite not having been on any birth control, it took us four years to conceive. It was a wonderful surprise," says Anneri, who gave birth via C-section due to unrelated complications.

Doctors don't believe vaginismus affects a woman's ability to give birth or cures the condition.

Anneri eventually found help for her problem with a sexologist who prescribed a hormonal and anaesthetic ointment and referred her to a physiotherapist for pelvic-floor treatment. She was taught how to breathe for optimal relaxation of specific muscles and was instructed how to do certain stretches before sex.

Although she's on the road to recovery, she's in no hurry to get involved in a new relationship. But she hasn't given up on love and hopes that when she meets that special someone, her feelings about sex will be much changed and more natural.

O NE in every six women who go to a sex clinic or consult a sexologist suffers from vaginismus, says Dr Woolf Solomon, a Johannesburg-based clinical psychologist who's run a private practice for more than 30 years and specialises in individual therapy as well as marriage, relationship and sex therapy.

Solomon treats between five and 10 cases a year of women who are unable to have sex, and the reason is usually vaginismus.

"It's an involuntary reaction – the vaginal muscle clamps up, preventing

An expert says one in six women who goes to a sex clinic suffers from vaginismus.



GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

The passion is there but the body isn't feeling it. There is, however, help for women who experience unbearable pain during sex **BY JOHANÉ SCOTT**

penetration," he explains. He says many of his patients don't even know the condition exists before they come to see him, and he thinks it's more common than is believed because many women never seek treatment.

It's a difficult thing to experience and to talk about, but what people need to know is that it's treatable.

Solomon has successfully treated a couple who'd been married for 21 years and were unable to have sex. He's also helped a couple who'd been married for 10 years and had never had penetrative sex and who, by the time they came to him, had made peace with the fact they'd never have children.

"They couldn't share it with anyone. They couldn't talk to anyone," he says. "They felt like it was something shameful."

Vaginismus doesn't discriminate and can happen to any woman, he says, but in his experience it's more common in women who come from a deeply religious background, or from ethnic or cultural groups where sex before marriage is forbidden.

"One might think this is something that doesn't happen anymore, but it does."

Women who believe sex before marriage is shameful and taboo may even

"disassociate with the lower half of their bodies", Solomon says. A lack of preparation for their first time having sex can also be a contributing factor (such as not having lubricant available), as are pressure and exhaustion on the wedding day.

"For a couple who've never had penetrative sex before the wedding, by the end of it they go home, they're exhausted, they need to sleep. But now they're convinced they must consummate the marriage."

The woman isn't sufficiently aroused, there's no lubricant to use and the groom is convinced he must perform. "They try but it doesn't work because she's tired and not relaxed. They try again and she'll be in pain and not want to do it again," he explains.

The real damage is done when a couple falls into a pattern of trying to have sex, not succeeding, and continuing to force the issue.

"The sooner a couple with this problem get to therapy, the easier it is to treat the condition," Solomon says. The extent of the therapy will depend on the severity of the vaginismus.

"Both partners must be involved. The woman will be given exercises to do such as relaxation methods and visualisation techniques, and the man must be there to support her," Solomon adds.

SOCIAL and emotional conditioning are the major causes of vaginismus, says Solomon, and a small percentage of women also develop vaginismus due to sexual trauma.

This was the case with

Christene Traill (31), an organ coordinator from Rustenburg in North West, who first experienced vaginismus at the age of 23 while in an abusive relationship.

When she realised she was unable to have sex one night, she thought something was wrong with her – even that she might have cervical cancer. Her boyfriend at the time, who was physically, emotionally and financially abusive towards her, had become sexually aggressive.

After a while she started to think what was happening sexually was her body's way of telling her she needed to get away from him.

She did leave him, and her next partner, now her husband, was the one who told her about vaginismus after scouring the internet for possible reasons as to why she was unable to have sex. Christene contacted an expert who confirmed the diagnosis. But she was still worried.

"Would I ever have a normal sex-life? Would I be able to have children? Will my husband, at that stage my boyfriend, give up and leave?" she says.

She attributes her happy marriage and now healthy sex-life to her husband, who's been incredibly supportive. She suffered from vaginismus for two years and says a combination of therapy and a home-made lubricant made with CBD and coconut oil are what helped her overcome it.

Our greatest sex organ is our brain, Solomon says, and it controls the spasming muscles.

The goal of therapy is to help a woman relax and feel in control of her vaginal muscles so she can enjoy sex without pain or discomfort. □



Christene Traill, who was in an abusive relationship, suddenly couldn't have sex one night. She was later diagnosed with vaginismus, which she had for two years.



Dr Marelize Swart, a psychologist and sex therapist from Somerset West, has 20 years' experience in sex therapy.

'WOULD I EVER HAVE A NORMAL SEX-LIFE? WOULD I BE ABLE TO HAVE CHILDREN'

Dr Woolf Solomon, a clinical psychologist from Johannesburg, has treated more than 200 women with vaginismus.

