

18. Shame & PMDD



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With Your Host

Maisie Hill

Period Power with Maisie Hill

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If you are in the horrors with menstrual cycle issues or you want to learn how to harness your hormones then you are in the right place.

Welcome to the *Period Power* podcast. I'm your host Maisie Hill menstrual health expert, acupuncturist, certified life coach and author of *Period Power*. I'm on a mission to help you get your cycle working for you so that you can use it to get what you want out of life. Are you ready? Let's go.

Hi folks. I had a fantastic start to my day today. I'm going to tell you about in a moment. But how is your day going? I hope the weather is lovely and that you're having a fantastic day. My day got off to a very beautiful and heart warming start because as my son and I were leaving the house we spotted this huge bumblebee.

And there's this thing that I do that I'm trying to stop doing. At the very least I am correcting myself when I notice myself doing it. And that's when I gender an animal as male. So this automatic and unconscious tendency when talking about an animal to describe them as male is very common. You might do it yourself too. So just pay attention, see if you notice yourself doing it. So my son and I were leaving the house and we spotted this bee. And my son was trying to feed it some cucumber and it flew away. And I said, "He's off somewhere else." And then I said, "Or maybe it's a girl."

And my son just casually said to me, "Or it could be non-binary." And it's one of my proudest parenting moments because I have conversations with him about gender. And it was just incredible to hear him say that. So I am in the second half of my cycle right now post ovulation. So I'm feeling quite reflective.

And it's also April so I've been spending some time reflecting on the first quarter of the year, January through to March and taking some time to plan the next few months. And particularly I was doing this exercise in relation to my word of the year that I wanted to embody in 2021 which is effective. So back in episode three I shared how I do this at the start of each calendar

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year and also at the start of each menstrual cycle. It's a really simple process to go through but its impact is huge, it's really powerful.

So if you haven't listened to that episode yet then check out the Living with Intention episode I think it's called, after you've done with this one. Stick with this one because today's topic is going to be epic. But to stay on the theme of what I've been doing this past week my word for the year is effective. And I've been evaluating how I best embodied my word of the year in the first few months. And my invitation to you is that you do this as well, but do it from a place of curiosity and celebration. Don't use this as an opportunity to beat yourself up.

So when I was thinking about how I have been effective in the last few months I was thinking about how proud I am of the Harness your Hormones course that I created for the members of The Flow Collective. I spent many months thinking about the knowledge that I have inside my brain and how I could best distil them down into simple and powerful teachings and strategies for anyone who joins The Flow Collective no matter where they're at in their reproductive lifecycle or what their experience of their hormones is.

I took a lot of time last year to figure this out and my goal for quarter one was to create the course and deliver it, which I did. And we've had two cohorts of new members go through the course and everyone else who was already in the flow collective has also been using it. And what I've noticed is that our members are getting results even quicker than they did before which I'm thrilled about because that was exactly my intention when I came up with this plan. So it's great to see it all panning out.

And today I've actually been in tears reading our weekly win thread which is what I do every week and every time I read that thread. But I could really see how many of our new members have already experienced significant changes and they only just joined a couple of weeks ago. So for me that's the biggest way I have embodied being effective. I've also hired someone to help create systems and processes in my business so that it's easier for

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the business to be effective and for the people who I work with and do work for me to do their jobs effectively.

And there's another couple of positions that I'm going to be hiring for and so my assistant, Beck, and Veronica, and her team who have been helping us develop our systems have been getting everything ready so that when I hire those people and they come into the business they're really set up for success so that they can also be effective. I have also been looking at where I haven't been effective.

And I can see that with a few things in my personal and professional life there can be a bit of a lag between making a decision and implementing it. So I'm taking that reflection and awareness into this next quarter. Most importantly though I want you to know what I'm not doing during this process. I'm not shaming myself for this. Yes, there have been times where I could have implemented things quicker but for one reason or another I didn't. I'm just looking at that, learning from it but I'm not shaming myself for it, which leads me very neatly into today's topic which is shame.

Now, I didn't get shame for a long time. I understood it on a cognitive level but it just wasn't an emotion that I experienced personally, or at least I thought that was what the case was. It really wasn't. But here's why I was, kind of had misguided thoughts about it. I just wasn't tuned into my emotions like I am now.

At that time I could definitely recognise some emotions like excitement, feeling irritable, and frustration, and anger, and joy. They're the kind of what I would describe as top level emotions. They're the heavy hitters that are pretty easy to identify because they hit us so hard. But often there's other emotions underneath them, the Gottman Institute talks about the anger iceberg, how on the surface we're angry. But underneath are all these other emotions that lead to anger like embarrassment, shame, humiliation, there's loads of them.

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But there's also this grey area as well, if we're not swinging wildly from anger to excitement, there's all the other emotions in between. And once I started paying more attention to my emotions I realised that I did experience shame, of course I did, it's normal and it's exceedingly common in humans. So I would notice it come up seemingly randomly until I learnt that thoughts are what create emotions. Then I was able to see that experiencing shame wasn't so random, it was tied into how I was thinking about myself.

So I'm going to borrow from the queen of shame, Brené Brown who defines shame as follows. "The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging, something we've experienced, done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."

And she goes on to say, "I don't believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behaviour than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection can make us dangerous", which I'm right there with you Brené a 100%. And of course shame relates to the menstrual cycle.

So back when I first came to this work all those years ago, shame would usually come up in relation to menstruation, the physiological act of bleeding because let's face it, we've largely been conditioned to see it as dirty and something that needs to be hidden. And I do think that's still there for many of us to some degree. I'm very open about when I'm bleeding.

But recently when my son said it matter of factly in a public place, which by the way I'm also very proud of him for. But when he said this in public I could feel myself wanting to hide and for him to just be quiet. And that was really interesting to observe in myself because it's not something that I thought was present. But where I see shame showing up the most in relation to the cycle is in my clients who have PMDD.

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So today I'm going to be talking about shame in relation to the cycle, and particularly through the lens of PMDD. Whether you have PMDD or not you're going to find it useful but so many of my clients in The Flow Collective have PMDD. And I hear from plenty of you who also have it and I have had my own experiences too. So I wanted to bring some attention to this area especially as it's PMDD awareness month right now. And I'm sure some of you are thinking right now, what is she talking about? What is PMDD?

So first things first, let me fill you in on what it is and what it isn't. PMDD stands for premenstrual dysphoric disorder. And I'm going to use the description from the International Association for Premenstrual Disorders' website which we will link to in the show notes because if you suspect or you know that you have PMDD you're going to want to check them out because they're awesome. They're incredibly helpful. And they do so much for the PMDD community. It's my favourite website to refer people to when we're talking about PMDD.

So premenstrual dysphoric disorder is a cyclical hormone based mood disorder with symptoms arising during the premenstrual or luteal phase of the menstrual cycle and subsiding within a few days of menstruation. It affects an estimated 5.5% of women and female at birth individuals of reproductive age. While PMDD is directly connected to the menstrual cycle it is not a hormone imbalance.

PMDD is a severe negative reaction in the brain to the natural rise and fall of estrogen and progesterone. It is a suspected cellular disorder in the brain. Symptoms can worsen over time and or around reproductive events such as menarche, the first menstrual cycle, pregnancy, birth, miscarriage, and perimenopause. So that's their description which I feel is so perfect. Now, PMDD is an internationally recognised disorder. And those that have it are at increased risk of things like intrusive thoughts, self-harm and suicide.

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It's diagnosed according to your symptoms which is why cycle tracking is as ever so important. So when you're cycle tracking you're collecting data that you can use in the diagnostic process. It's helpful for you and it's helpful for healthcare providers who are assisting you. With PMDD it's not something that can be diagnosed through blood tests. There are occasions where blood tests can be useful because you can have PMDD and have a hormonal imbalance for example. But ultimately PMDD is about your sensitivity or the impact of hormones rather than their levels.

So the symptoms of PMDD include as follows, but just remember these symptoms must occur in the second half of the cycle, so that's between ovulation and menstruation. And they then must disappear within a few days of your period starting and they're usually pretty significant ones as well.

So here are the symptoms. Mood or emotional changes, irritability, anger or increased interpersonal conflict, depressed mood, feelings of hopelessness, feeling worthless or guilty, anxiety, tension or feelings of being keyed up or on edge. Decreased interest in usual activities, so that might be work, school, your hobbies, your mates, difficulty concentrating, struggling to focus or think straight. The presence of brain fog, tiredness or low energy, changes in appetite, food cravings, overeating or binge eating. Excessive sleepiness or insomnia, feeling overwhelmed or out of control.

And physical symptoms such as breast tenderness or swelling, joint or muscle pain and bloating. So a lot of folks that I've worked with have told me that they experience relief from their symptoms pretty much as soon as their period starts. But they then go through what is often referred to as a PMDD hangover which is where shame can really linger on. So when they're in their luteal phase and the PMDD symptoms are showing up, they're in that. And the shame of that can be really intense.

But when they go back to feeling like themselves again, which is often what they described the process as, the shame continues because of what they haven't been able to do whilst their symptoms were present. So I will give

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you an example of how this can show up but if this is of interest to you, particularly when we're talking about productivity and being worthy and things along that line then do check out the productivity episode that I did a little while ago.

So let's say you're in the thick of it, you're having a lot of negative thoughts about yourself and experiencing some strong 'negative emotions', maybe you're also feeling quite fatigued and having trouble thinking straight because of brain fog. So because of this you might then find it hard to get up and do some work. So then what happens is your email inbox fills up with requests from other people. Friends might be reaching out to you, but you're not replying. You might cancel plans last minute.

And then what often happens is you make these things mean a lot about you. But none of these things mean anything and they don't mean anything about you. They're literally just emails and texts, words on a screen that you haven't replied to. I promise you it doesn't matter who sent the email to you, it's not as important as you think it is in that moment. And if you pulled out of a plan that you'd made, it's not a big deal. You could choose to make that mean that you're taking care of yourself and learning about what's doable or not for you when your symptoms show up.

Maybe next time you'll make tentative plans and say you'll confirm on the day instead, it's perfectly fine to do this and it could be incredibly loving. But instead of thinking about it this way, you're thinking I should be able to work. I should be able to socialise, other people don't have this problem. Other people can function, there's something wrong with me. I don't know why friends or my partner puts up with me. They're going to leave me. I'm an awful person, my life is doomed.

And of course if you're thinking these kinds of thoughts then you will feel shame or other emotions such as anxiety, fear, worry, overwhelm, rejection, sadness, all the fun ones. And when you're feeling this way it's going to make it harder to answer those emails or reply to your friends. And I'm not saying that you should by the way, that's a 100% up to you.

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But what's happening here is that you're just descending further down the shame spiral. And when that happens your brain's just like, "Yeah, remember that time when you didn't get that right? Yeah and how about that time you said that to so and so, you didn't get that right either. Yeah, you weren't at your best that day either were you? How about that time when you were five and you did that as well."

And your brain just basically goes on a rampage creating more and more evidence of how you're just pathetic, and useless, and an awful human being. And you should just remove yourself from all human interactions because why would anyone put up with you and your behaviour. But this is just what human brains do. So if what I've described is ringing true you are in the majority, there's nothing wrong with you. You just have a human brain, congratulations. But it is a really shitty cycle to be in because it just keeps perpetuating itself.

In the criticism webinar that I did in The Flow Collective the other week I was explaining all the ways that this process impacts on your hormones and why these negative thoughts are so detrimental to our hormones and overall wellbeing. And when they saw my diagram the members were just like, "Oh shit." So when you see it right in front of you you're like, "Okay, I get it." This is why we spend so much time focusing on these areas.

But the good news about this is that because it's so extensive that actually means that there are so many ways of interrupting this process instead of just letting your thoughts run riot and just descending into a shame spiral in which your inner critic brings up everything you've ever done wrong or it thinks you've ever done wrong. Because most likely you haven't done things wrong.

So today what I want to spend time with you on is giving you some tools to get out of it. The first option that I want to give you is to be willing to experience shame. I know. I'm making it sound so fun. And I'm not saying here that you should feel shame or that you deserve to feel shame. But folks with PMDD often spend a lot of time trying to run away from our

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emotions and then they just get so intense that it feels like we're drowning in emotion. And I would say this is actually true for most humans, PMDD or not.

So I love this as a starting place because when you come to trust that you can experience any emotion and survive, you can do anything. And this is how I actually started working on my emotional wellbeing, by fully accepting and experiencing all of the emotions that I experience as a human, not distracting myself, not using external things like a packet of biscuits or an hour long scroll on Instagram to get a dopamine hit to try and make myself feel better, not judging why that feeling is there.

Just fully allowing the emotion and just letting my body open up to the physical experience of that particular emotion. So if you think of each emotion as a particular vibration or experience then we can just allow them to be there, to just move through our body, to just be there in our body.

Our emotions aren't out to get us. They're usually there in a misguided attempt to protect us. I love this practice because it builds resilience. You begin to realise that you can experience any human emotion and survive it. The world isn't going to end even though your nervous system might be telling you that it's going to.

And for a year or so I got really fascinated with shame and allowing myself to experience it. I would notice it coming up, just let it be there, and allow it to move through me, which is what all emotions do when we actually let them instead of resisting and avoiding them and making them a problem. So I didn't judge that shame for being there. I just watched it, and I felt it, and I approached shame with loving fascination. And I did this because I was working on building evidence that I can experience any emotion and survive it.

But not just that but that I could experience deep shame and still continue going about my day. I could allow it to be there whilst playing with my son at the beach. I could feel it whilst coaching someone and still coach the shit

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out of them. I was doing a lot of experimentation around feeling all these emotions and still being able to function, which is what I teach my clients to do in The Flow Collective. Our emotional lives can be really quite binary. We can go from one extreme to the other, super happy to very low.

And we're usually not taught how to feel our emotions. So our emotions just get bottled up and then the pressure builds and the pressure builds, and they just pour out of us. So we can end up feeling scared of being emotional and just reserve being emotional for when we can cry in the bathroom, or on the sofa, or after we've had a bottle Merlot, or maybe just before your period's due, just save it all up for then. But it doesn't have to be this way. This might come as a surprise to you but you can allow your emotions to be there whilst going about your day.

Your emotional life doesn't have to be separate to your actual life. Many of you have asked me recently how I'm able to do the work I do whilst being autistic and being an emotional person, which I think we all are. It's not just you and me. But it's because I let my emotions come along for the ride. I don't save them up like I used to. I still have huge cries now and then, 100%, but they come and then they go and I don't have huge crying hangovers like I used to because there just isn't that huge build up and release anymore.

So that's my tip number one, be aware of when you're feeling shame and observe it in your body and let it be there.

My second suggestion is that you question your thoughts. This is something my clients often say when they first start working with me is that they can't function in the second half of their cycle. And not being able to function sounds very factual doesn't it? But it's just a thought.

And as I prepared for this podcast I thought I'd look it up and see if there's an actual definition out there because I know it's a phrase that's often used within mental health. And don't get me wrong, I think it can be helpful as a way of someone describing their experience, particularly when they're

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communicating what's going on for them with a medical professional or with people in their lives. But when I'm exploring it with my clients most of the time it isn't helping them. It isn't serving them.

So when I'm coaching someone I might ask them to clarify what they mean by not being able to function. And very interestingly the topic of showering often comes up. Because many of the people I have spoken to with PMDD will share that they shower less than they usually do when their PMDD symptoms emerge. Now, going with this example you might desire to shower at the same frequency as you do in the first half of the cycle and that's something that we could work on.

But before we get to that point how about you stop beating yourself up for not showering because here's the thing, human showering every day is a very new behaviour. Most humans on our planet do not shower every day. And we could actually argue that although having access to clean water and good hygiene is very beneficial. Washing, and scrubbing, and lathering ourselves up every day is not. Overzealous cleaning actually disrupts the community of healthy bacteria on your skin, the bacteria that forms the skin's micro biome.

And I realise I'm saying this in a pandemic so I hope you realise I'm not in any way suggesting that you shouldn't be taking sensible hygiene measures right now. But over-cleaning can strip the skin and affect oil production. It can cause acne and it can cause some skin conditions. And all the products that we commonly use on our bodies, on our face, on our hair can also come with their own issues because many of them can interfere with your hormones.

And I'll link to a Harvard health blog about how daily showers can cause skin problems and other health issues, which by the way can include decreased immunity. And of course they also use up a lot of water. My point with all of this being, it's not a problem if you don't shower every day. And it's certainly not a measure of whether you're a good person or not.

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But we've all been imprinted with this cleanliness is next to godliness or some non-biblical version of that through our upbringing.

So many of you will make not showering every day mean a whole lot of things about you, that you're useless, and disgusting, and unworthy, and why would anyone ever love you. This is what I mean when I say question your thoughts. And it's helpful to actually write them down so that you can see them for what they are and then you can interrogate them.

And if they're not useful to you then find some other thoughts to think, which is my suggestion number three, find some more neutral thoughts. And I'll give you some examples of some neutral thoughts that you could choose to think on purpose instead of all the shitty ones that I've covered so far. So you could think neutral thoughts such as I'm a human who has PMDD and this is how it impacts me at the moment. Some parts of my cycle are harder and that doesn't mean anything about me as a person. I'm learning to love myself throughout my cycle.

This is what it can be like to have PMDD; I can love myself even if I don't shower every day. I can love myself even when I'm lying on the sofa crying and eating biscuits and feeling shame. Just remember I'm not saying that you should feel shame for any of that. I'm saying that you can love yourself through shame. Notice here how we're not jumping to the land of rainbows and daisies, and making space for your experience, and just allowing it to be there. But what we're doing is removing the criticism, the judgement, and the shame.

Here are some other quick tips that I want to give you. Pay attention to when you experience shame. Notice is there a pattern that relates to your cycle? Cycle tracking is going to help you with this, and make sure you download the free guide from my website or you can use the link in the show notes. Notice what influences shame. It can be really straightforward things here like not eating enough, not eating frequently enough.

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And blood sugar dysregulation, that might leave you more susceptible to feeling shame, as can being hung-over, as can overcrowding your diary and just cramming things in. You might be setting yourself up for a not so great time if you do these things. But ultimately it does come down to your thoughts because your thoughts create your feelings. So you want to find the thoughts that lead to feeling shame, which means paying attention when you're feeling shame, being willing to be present with your shame and just getting curious about why you're feeling it.

What are the thoughts you're thinking about yourself that are creating that shame? And your brain, your lovely brain is going to want to tell you that it's because of things that are external to you like the email from your manager, or the text from your mum, or something someone on the school run told you, but it's not. It's all to do with your thoughts.

Don't hand over responsibility to things external from you because if you do that you're going to end up needing the rest of the world to always cooperate with you in order for you to be okay, which I'm sorry to tell you is never going to happen. So pay attention to the thoughts that you think about yourself.

Also I really suggest just noticing the standard to which you hold yourself, is it realistic? Is it helpful? If not, please change it. I'm going to guess that if you're listening to this podcast that you have a high/impossible standard of yourself because most folks who are socialised as female do. Another idea is that you can share your shame with someone. Text a friend about what's bothering you, because the thing is, shame wants us to hide. And when we have courage and we share it we can free ourselves from it.

And as a final option, you can also just decide that you're not available to experience shame. This is different to ignoring it when it shows up. And it's something that I'm currently working on, I'm being very boundaried about shame now that I know I can experience it and my world doesn't end. And so now I'm just thinking, no, I'm not willing to experience shame around

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that. I'm not going to feel shame because of that. It's incredibly empowering, so know that that's an option too.

And for those of you with PMDD or any other condition I also just want you to know that you don't have to explain or justify yourself to anyone, including yourself. Just let yourself be and focus on removing any shame that is around that topic.

If this episode has resonated with you, I'd love it if you could subscribe, rate and review the podcast so that other folks can find it too. I am very passionate about PMDD, so I want more people to hear this episode because I know it's going to help so many people.

And if you'd love to hear more about subjects like this and what we've covered today, then my guess is that you're going to love The Flow Collective. It's my monthly membership where I combine group coaching with helpful webinars and you also get to hang out in our incredible community. The doors are currently closed but you can get your name on the wait list for when we open again in the summer, and you just use the link in the show notes, or if you're listening to this at a future date then follow the link and see if the doors are open.

Okay my loves, have a cracking week and I will see you next time.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of the *Period Power* podcast. If you enjoyed learning how to make your cycle work for you, head over to maisiehill.com for more.