

Like many other women, I find sex agonising | Olivia Funnell

[Olivia Funnell](#) Thu 9 Jun 2016 12.05 BST

I suffer from vaginismus, which makes penetrative sex feel as if I'm being ripped in half. I still have hope that one day I will be able to try again



'When it feels like your vagina is being stabbed by a thousand tiny knives, relaxing is the last thing on your mind.' Photograph: Tino Tedaldi/Getty Images/Cultura RF

In a world where bodies quiver and shake in music videos, where shirtless [Calvin Klein](#) models lick the sweat off each other and sex can be as casual as a handshake, how do you navigate your way through it if you actually cannot have sex? What do you do when your girlfriends discuss funny sex stories over cocktails? And most importantly, how do you tell someone you love that you can't have sex with them because it causes you excruciating pain? Trust me, even the kindest and most patient people will tire of this sort of limitation. This is my reality, and it isn't as uncommon as you might

think. But it also lurks in the shadows of shame and misunderstanding.

My story began seven years ago when I lost my virginity. It hurt a lot but I thought that was normal for the first time. Then it kept happening. Every time. The pain was like a tearing, burning pain that felt like I was being ripped in half. Sometimes I would be fighting back tears but out of a fear of being uptight, I kept trying and trying and trying. For me, sex became something I had to do to have boyfriend. Not a mutually enjoyable way of displaying affection for another human being. It was, sadly, a transaction.

It got to a point where I knew something was seriously wrong because none of my friends experienced any pain beyond the first time. Granted not many of them experienced orgasm from penetration in itself, but they didn't seem to mind having sex. Whereas, for me, it was the stuff of nightmares.

So I went to see a gynaecologist. In between bad jokes about genitalia and bites of cottage cheese crackers (seriously) the gynaecologist told me that I had something called [vaginismus](#). What sounded like a horrendous fungal growth between my legs was actually an involuntary muscle spasm of the pelvic floor muscles that occurred during penetration. The tightening of the muscles – much like an eyelid closing to prevent something getting inside – was what was causing the searing pain. The muscle responsible for the involuntary contraction is the pubococcygeus muscle, which is responsible for urine control, contracting during orgasm and pushing a baby out.

Finally, I'd figured it out, and was one step closer to having a healthy and enjoyable sex life! Not the case. While I was told that it was very

treatable, he also informed me that I just needed to relax more. But when it feels like your vagina is being stabbed by a thousand tiny knives, relaxing is the last thing on your mind. But I took the advice, and tried to relax more. I tried for five years. Five long alcohol-fuelled years of faking orgasms, fighting back tears and feeling pathetic because I couldn't do the most basic thing.

That brings us to 2015. The year that I engaged in a sort of long-distance relationship. I'd met a guy when I was travelling through Europe and we'd engaged in a fling but it ended. A couple of years later, in between emails and Skype calls, the spark reignited, and before I knew it I was on a plane to Spain to see if this long-distance thing was going anywhere. Needless to say, I was nervous about what was going to happen in the bedroom. But I thought it'd be fine because he knew that I was dealing with vaginismus. Without going into detail – it was not fine. I was nearly winded from the pain, he was mean and I cried. A lot.

That night, one of the worst nights of my life, was when I made a decision to take back my self-respect and sort this vaginismus thing out once and for all. So I stopped having sex altogether and made a promise to myself that I wouldn't until it would be good for me.

I researched and delved deep into Google to find some help and I found a physiotherapy centre that specialised in pelvic floor muscles. The way that vaginismus is usually treated is via pelvic floor physiotherapy – the tight muscles need to be gently released. I have to say that it is very beneficial. Yes, the therapy sessions do involve a latex-wearing physio stretching your pelvic floor muscles with their fingers, but it helps a lot. However, vaginismus is as much a mental condition as it is a physical one and it is common in women from strict cultural or religious backgrounds. Therefore, the

condition can also require [counselling](#). However, the catch-22 with the therapy is that after a certain point it must be paired with regular, pain-free sex and to do that you need someone who you can trust. I never found that person, so I am still not fully treated.

While I have not overcome this condition yet, there are many others – beautiful, strong women – who are holding their breath and fighting back tears in the bedroom. Many of whom can overcome it. You are not alone, and there is a way to fix the painful thing that you can't talk about. I have hope, but I am not yet a success story. So, if you are reading this and you happen to be the next person that I have a relationship with – please be patient with me. I have an actual seven-year sting.

- For more information, head to www.nhs.uk or find a pelvic floor physiotherapist in your local area