

Q&A: I cry after sex

Have you ever been having a perfectly enjoyable sexual experience only to find yourself uncontrollably sobbing afterwards? There are lots of reasons why someone might cry after sex, but most of the time it's because of a phenomenon called postcoital dysphoria, and it's more common than you might think. Studies have found that nearly half of all women experience this at some point in their lives. We'll talk all about this condition, and I'll also give you tips on how to handle it if this happens to your partner during sex.

Let's get started. Okay, so this question came through the Love & Libido website from one of our subscribers. Here it goes.

My partner and I of one and a half years were going at it when I randomly started crying, like fully sobbing. It was unprovoked and I was enjoying the sex. Is this normal and how do I help my partner realize that it wasn't his fault? Okay, this is a great question.

As I said in the intro, it sounds to me like you experienced a phenomenon that we refer to as postcoital dysphoria. This is basically a fancy way of saying you experienced sadness after sex. Most people who have this experience, a sense of tearfulness, a sense of melancholy or depression, anxiety, or even some aggression, which is hard to control or minimize.

Other studies have found that despite the presence of crying or sobbing like you experienced, the emotion behind the tears is less often about frustration or displeasure and more often about feelings of love or closeness, kind of like when you're so happy that you weep. So first of all, there is absolutely nothing abnormal about this phenomenon. It hasn't been widely researched, but the studies we do have find that about 46% of women have experienced this at least once in their lifetime and 5-9% experience it on a more regular basis.

I think it's kind of interesting that the word dysphoria is used because this word has a negative connotation. On the one hand, the word makes sense because there's usually a great deal of sobbing like you described, but when you look at the qualitative research on the topic, most women say that the tears are not tears of sadness necessarily, but more tears of feelings of intense love, passion, or joy. And this falls in line with how you described your experience.

You said you were enjoying the experience and then bam, sobbing. So let's take a closer look at what the research has found. First of all, this phenomenon appears more commonly in women.

In fact, we have little data about how men experience it, if at all, although I'm sure some of them do. A 2015 study hypothesized that the cause is multifactorial, meaning there may be several reasons why someone would experience this. Now, the study didn't find

a close link between postcoital dysphoria and intimacy, meaning it didn't have that much to do with how close you feel to your partner.

The researchers also couldn't establish a strong link between PCD and sexual functioning, meaning it wasn't necessarily related to things like frustration over one's ability to have an orgasm. They did mention that one study found that people were more likely to experience PCD if they had a history of childhood sexual abuse. Now, if you think about it, if you have a history of abuse, there's a lot of shame that you might carry about your sexuality.

And as a side note, I always like to remind people who do have a history of sexual abuse who feel shame that that shame is not theirs to carry. It is the abuser's. A lot of times we take on feelings that don't belong to us.

We call these carried feelings. So you're carrying around shame that really belongs to the person who acted shamelessly. So that's kind of a side note.

But a lot of times that feeling gets locked in and it sticks around and it shows up in situations where it doesn't belong, which is essentially a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. And so it may be that you know on an intellectual level that you are having a sexual experience with someone who you love and care about and it is pleasurable, but that emotion that's now maybe attached to your sexuality also shows up leading to an intense negative emotional reaction. So that can certainly happen for some people, but the majority of people who experience this PCD don't have that.

So meaning it doesn't necessarily mean that maybe you had a history of sexual abuse that you don't remember or anything like that. It appears to be kind of random. So let's go a little bit deeper into some of this study's findings.

The researchers, they did find a relationship between attachment and differentiation of self with PCD. So let me break that down. Attachment refers to the security we feel about our emotional connection to our partner.

Some people have what we refer to as an anxious attachment, meaning they feel insecure about their partner's feelings or they're constantly questioning whether or not their partner really loves them. People with an avoidant attachment style tend to be more emotionally closed off in relationships. So this study found that people who have a more anxious or a more avoidant attachment style were more likely to experience post-coital dysphoria.

And that may be because the feelings kind of get mixed up. On the one hand, you want to feel secure with the person that you're with, but you are actually pretty anxious about your feelings towards them or anxious or insecure about their feelings toward you. And the confluence of two different emotions leads to the experience of crying.

Or in the case of people who have a more avoidant style of attachment, it may mean that they're just repressing or feeling inhibited about emotional expression. And then they have sex with the person and those feelings sort of bubble up uncontrollably. So that's kind of what that means and what the researchers are hypothesizing there.

Now, differentiation of self in relationships refers to the degree to which you can balance a sense of closeness to your partner with a sense of autonomy in your relationship. So some people feel like they kind of lose themselves in relationships, which means that there is poor differentiation. Now, given the link between poor differentiation and PCD that this study found, the authors hypothesize that people who have a tendency to become fused with their partner, meaning that they don't really know where they end and their partner begins, may perceive the end of sex as a separation from their partner, which can feel really overwhelming.

The authors of this study also speculated that those with lower differentiation may be more anxious about losing their self or fearful of losing control during sexual intercourse, which then results in some of these sexual problems. So again, if we're breaking these studies down and looking a bit deeper emotionally, we can look at the kind of attachment style we have with our partner, and that may be an indicator as to whether or not you're more likely to experience PCD. And we can also look at this phenomenon referred to as differentiation of self, meaning who are you in relationship to your partner? Do you feel like you're someone who can stand on your own two feet and be assertive and express your wants and needs? Or do you feel like you're the kind of person who loses yourself to your partner? And if it's the latter, basically what this study is saying is that you may be a bit more likely to experience PCD.

Now, as I said before, most studies believe the reason is multifactorial, meaning there is probably more than one reason why someone might experience this. We know that hormones may be a piece of the puzzle because women are more likely to experience PCD at certain times during their menstrual cycle, or when going through fertility treatment, or during menopause, or after having a baby. So that may be a question to ask yourself, did you experience this when you were PMSing? Or are you going through fertility? Or are you on the brink of menopause? I mean, all of those can sort of mess with our hormones, which can definitely affect our emotions.

And so that may be one of the reasons why. Now, of course, there are plenty of other reasons why someone may cry during sex. And I want to outline some of those reasons, because it's not always just about post-coital dysphoria.

So sexual pain is a big one. Listen, sex should not hurt unless you want it to, unless there is some pleasure mixed with the pain that is intentional. But some people can experience sexual pain.

There are different kinds of sexual pain. I won't go into all of them in the interest of

today's episode. But one of the more common reasons for sexual pain is something called vaginismus, which is basically an involuntary spasm of the pelvic floor muscles, so much that intercourse can, you know, at best be really painful and at worst be completely impossible.

And I treat a lot of women who experience sexual pain. And I would say 95% of them describe lots of instances of crying after sex. And most of the time, that's because A, it's painful.

And if something really hurts, it's natural to cry about it. And also just because it's really frustrating. I mean, these are people who really love and care about their partner, who really want to have pleasurable sex, but are unable to because it feels like their body is betraying them.

And so crying during or after sex can be a very normal and typical reaction in these cases. Another reason why someone might cry during or after sex is because maybe they're having sex despite not really wanting to. And when we're doing something that really goes against our value system, or if we have allowed ourselves to feel pressured or coerced into a sexual experience that we don't want, that can lead to tears.

It can bring up feelings of shame or guilt or anxiety or fear. And crying would be a natural reaction to some of those emotions. Sometimes people cry during sex because they are just in a stage or season of life where they feel completely overwhelmed.

And sex is emotional. As much as we try to reduce it down to this physical thing that happens between two people, it's really emotional. And sometimes it can kind of serve as an outlet for our emotions.

And so if you are just under a lot of stress or pressure in your life in general, and then you have sex, you may find that some of that emotion just comes out during or after the sexual experience. And so that may be another reason why. A fourth reason is that maybe you are in fact depressed.

And sex sometimes triggers some symptoms of depression. So if this is happening to you on a more regular basis, meaning it's not just random the way this person described it who wrote in to the podcast, you may want to ask yourself if you're having any other symptoms of depression. Are you having difficulty concentrating? Are you having disrupted sleep? Has your appetite decreased or increased? Are you generally feeling kind of sad or melancholy or having the blues? And sex is also a time when you're feeling those symptoms being triggered.

So if that's the case, definitely talk with your doctor and make sure you get a thorough evaluation to see if depression may be going on. And then finally, it could be because you have anxiety. We have studies that show that orgasms can actually lead to panic

attacks in women who struggle with anxiety.

That may be in part because people who have anxiety want to feel like they're in control all the time. And sometimes that sense of losing control can happen during sex or especially during an orgasm and add to that just the increase in heart rate and changes in blood pressure and breathing. All of that can feel kind of similar to a panic attack.

And so if you're having these symptoms on a more regular basis and that is paired with other symptoms of anxiety that you're experiencing just in your life in general, that also may be something that you want to explore a little bit more carefully with your partner.

Now, what should you do if this happens to your partner? Let's say you're on the other side of this and you're having this perfectly enjoyable experience and then your partner suddenly burst into tears afterwards. First of all, you want to take a deep breath yourself.

Remember that nine times out of ten, it probably has nothing to do with you. Begin by just asking a really open-ended question about what's going on. Try not to jump to any conclusions.

So you may just say to them, hey, what's going on? Did something happen? Are you okay? More likely than not, if they're experiencing post-coital dysphoria, they will answer, I have no idea. And so what you want to do then is reassure them. It's okay.

I'm here for you. Just let it out. A lot of times the partner, the one who's crying just wants to be held and comforted in that moment.

So simply giving them that physical reassurance, that sense of your presence can go a long way in helping them feel more grounded, centered, and relaxed. And that kind of response is going to minimize the chance that this continues to happen or it turns into a pattern. One thing that the person said who wrote in with the question is how can they make their partner believe that it really has nothing to do with them.

First of all, share this episode with them. Because again, when we look at the studies and the research, we know that nine and a half times out of ten, it has nothing to do with something the partner did or didn't do. That it's just this like random occurrence that happens that tends to be multifactorial.

So most of the time it has nothing to do with the partner. And so you can just first reassure them that it doesn't have anything to do with them, that there's this phenomenon that nearly half of women experience at some point in their lives. And so it's just kind of this thing that happens and that sex is emotional.

And sometimes kind of intense emotions can come out through a sexual experience. And that's okay. I mean, we are human after all.

Emotion during sex is one of the things that makes human sex so profound and so special and so meaningful. And so I think just letting them know that can go a long way. But again, if you are on the receiving end of this and this happens to your partner, the best thing that you can do to prevent this from happening more regularly is to A, not take it personally.

B, ask an open-ended question about what they think may be going on so that if there is something that they can identify, you can work through it together as a couple. And C, just reassure them. Let them know it's okay to cry.

It's okay to let the feelings out. Hold them, be tender, caress. Those sorts of things can go a long way in helping them to feel better about themselves because this has happened.

So I hope that this answered your question and I want to thank you for writing into the show.