

Menstruation: Why Taboo?

Dear Pennsylvania Department of Education,

I'm trying my best to stay awake during the first period, when I feel a tap on my shoulder. The student next to me speaks in a whisper as she asks, "Do you have..." she lowers her voice even further, "a pad?"

Immediately, I'm alert. I nod knowingly, and unzip the front pocket of my backpack, concealing the item in my shirt sleeve. Darting my eyes to catch any unknown spectators, I pass her the item. She stuffs it into her pocket and she leaves, giving me a thumbs up.

Mission accomplished.

But why should it be an undercover mission every time a classmate needs a pad? Why should menstruation be a taboo subject? Why should we use euphemisms instead of the word "menstruation?" Half of the world's population is visited by "Aunt Flo" every month. And yet, many are uncomfortable discussing the topic.

So where does this uneasiness stem from? Menstruation has been a taboo subject for millennia, with many ancient cultures believing menstrual blood to have "toxic, disease-causing effects," therefore seeing the cycle as a sign of uncleanness or impurity (Druet, par. 8). Indeed, 19th century Western scientists deemed women unfit to work because they menstruated (Purtill, par. 3). Although the idea of menstrual blood toxicity was disproven in the late 1950s, stigma around menstruation persists. What we don't realize is the ignorance this shame causes. In fact, in a 2023 study by period.org, 42% of teens said they felt unprepared when they got their first period.

My mother's openness around menstruation prepared me for my period. Despite this, I experienced extreme nausea and vomiting the week before menstruation for a year after my first period. My mother never experienced this, so we didn't know it was connected to my period until further research. I missed many days of school, and remember feeling scared, confused, and ashamed.

However, nausea and vomiting around the period are not uncommon. Had they been included in health education, I could have been better equipped to handle them. Little of the real-life experience of menstruation is communicated. The majority of what I know about how to manage my cycle is through trial and error, and educating myself. This should not be the case. Girls have a right to learn about our own bodies in a clear and uninhibited way.

We need to change how the menstrual cycle is taught in schools in order to combat this ignorance and stigma. The current form of menstrual education is unacceptable. It ingrains shame in our girls, and hinders our boys from a proper education on this essential knowledge. Detailed, transparent discussion from a young age is crucial to dismantling this centuries-long censorship cycle, in addition to teaching boys and girls the same, and together. I implore you to open the menstruation conversation, and in turn build a future of educated men and confident women (and less in-class undercover missions).

Sincerely,

Naomi Manglos

Works Cited

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