

YOUR PERIOD HANDBOOK

NATURAL SOLUTIONS FOR
STRESS FREE MENSTRUATION



Natasha Richardson

of

FORAGE
BOTANICALS

Your Period Handbook

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AEON

To my ever supportive husband

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My Story

I'm currently at a women's retreat, surrounded by the wilds of Snowdonia, sitting with my chai tea next to an open fire, the sound of the river in the background and the scent of nag champa incense thick in the air. I couldn't get more cliché if I tried. If I'm honest, the cliché comes naturally to me. But I feel an inner struggle. A part of me fights against the cliché because it seems to me that discovering women's mysteries and empowerment shouldn't always be wrapped in hippy packaging because it doesn't appeal to many women.

I believe there is a growing movement, a new aesthetic, which is taking the soul of feminism into a new era. One where the use of baby pink and downward pointing triangles reins supreme!

When I talk about feminism I don't just mean equal rights for men and women. The part of feminism I'm interested in is our relationship to our bodies. I think we have made great strides forward in many areas of equal rights but the education we receive about our bodies is still massively influenced by many years of patriarchy gone by.

When I was learning about medicine on my herbal medicine degree, back in 2007, the sexism that is so intermingled with the topic became more and more apparent. There is something so unquestionable about medicine. We accept its teachings under the assumption that it is the result of centuries of high quality research.

The trouble is that research wasn't always as self-reflective as it is now (and it's not great now). There are definitions and conceptualisations of fundamental facts of female and male bodies that are still shaped by the patriarchy of that time. Definitions that go so far back we've stopped questioning them. I believe

it's these taken-for-granted "facts" that have the most insidious effects on us.

These definitions and concepts are so deeply set into our understanding of science they have become unquestionable. What is the origin of the word "vagina", for instance? Why do we assume women must experience pain during childbirth? Do the diagrams of our reproductive organs represent a real life woman? It is crucial that we begin to learn to question these things, to go back to the very foundations of the science of women's health and ask ourselves, is that even right?!

We must go back to the drawing board. We must be aware of the etymology of the names we use every day for ourselves, and these are just the areas we *are* taught in schools! The fact remains that there is a tonne of fabulous enlightening info we have about our bodies that we've recently discovered and don't teach.

This book will teach you everything you weren't taught at school and question all the things you were!

You don't have to be sick for your periods to be affecting your life. There are many subtle changes which menstruators experience, that can't be helped with drugs. Have you ever missed a period and wondered why? Or had a very light period and thought, where'd all the blood go? Or suddenly flooded through your underwear and trousers? Have you ever had a period come a week late following a week of emergency pregnancy tests? When our periods change it can be incredibly worrying. But, sadly, when visiting the doctor, it's pretty common to be told those changes are probably normal and there is nothing to worry about. More often than not, there is nothing they can offer you to rectify the issue.

This book is going to tell you what those changes really mean about your wellbeing, and what you can do to ensure it doesn't happen again.

We all know that there is a big difference between perfect

health and disease. But just because you don't qualify as "sick" doesn't mean you shouldn't be body-conscious and make changes to improve your wellbeing. Because, in the end, these changes, if left uncared for, can grow into illnesses like Endometriosis, Adenomyosis, Fibroids and Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome.

Sadly, getting these diagnosed can be a long uphill battle for recognition. We aren't taught in schools what symptoms are unacceptable when it comes to our periods. Menstrual wellbeing is being introduced to the syllabus in 2020! So we are left without the tools to even notice something that should be reported to a doctor. Through menstruation, birth and menopause we are treated as though our own bodies are far beyond our capability of understanding. But it is my belief that we don't have to be qualified in medicine to interpret the whispers of our body.

This book will teach you to listen to those whispers so you never have to hear it scream.

If however, you have come to this book, diagnosis in hand, screams-a-happening, I would hope this book helps you understand how managing your stress levels and mental health will help you to take the edge off your symptoms. Though the potential for healing may go way beyond just "taking the edge off", I would encourage you to find a herbalist you really click with to take it to the max.

I believe that the mind and body reflect one another, are intertwined, so it is possible that dealing with the emotional side of these illnesses has a lasting effect on the illness itself. It's certainly a pattern I have seen in countless patients in my practice. So, although this book won't speak in-depth about treating those illnesses, I have included short introductions to them to get you started, and I won't be surprised if the tips contained herein create subtle yet dramatic changes for you too.

Disease very rarely appears out of the blue. The reality is that it is often a slow journey there. Unless it is caused by a virus, an infection, or is inherited. The tricky part of inherited

period problems (or those problems that start at menarche) is that the natural chaos of the first few years of menarche can make it almost impossible to tell a natural but problematic period from a period problem caused by disease. The patients I have treated as teens with menstrual problems always seem to struggle to be heard by the medical professionals. Treated as though they are simply crying wolf.

The blood tests done on the NHS could be used to try and get these people diagnosed faster. Even if my teen-patients do get a diagnosis, the only treatment offered is usually birth control. Which doesn't address the pathology but simply dictates a non-bleeding time and a bleeding time. This is usually given to women as if it fixes the underlying hormonal imbalance, but when the pill is stopped (often when conception is on the horizon) these problems return and pregnancy is very hard to come by.

We seem to be more interested in creating the impression of a period than in helping menstruators find wellbeing and true health.

There is a disconnection of periods from our bodies. As though they exist outside of us. As though, somehow, they are not integral to our being. After all, men don't have them and they're just fine!

I remember playing in the playground one day at primary school. I would have been around 8-11 years old. An older girl had brought in a teen magazine and we had been reading the questions page. There was a period question! I asked what a period was, and was told it's when you bleed between your legs. I was filled with fear and wonder all at once. Why would I bleed? Where would it come from? How could this be natural? Later that year my Mum bought me a book about adolescence that I took to school with me. My girl friends and I poured over this book, fascinated, for weeks.

When I was at school, I learnt about the cycle of hormones

and how they lead to pregnancy or periods. We also had a special lesson, where a woman came in and guided us through different sanitary products, and ended with her giving us a little parcel of them to go home with. I remember how exciting it was. Like we'd been welcomed into a secret club. When we left the classroom the boys wanted to know what was in our bags, but we kept it a secret, full of intrigue. We felt sophisticated, knew that if we had told them they would have acted like it was gross and made us feel worse.

I didn't learn what cervical mucous is, why my tummy seems to bloat each month, why my periods often started with brown gunk, why I felt so tired before my period, why they hurt . . . I had to teach myself all of that and because of that I felt so let down by my school for 10 years after my periods began!

I was once in sociology class at school. I must have been 17 or 18. I was daydreaming, as I often did, when a fellow student caught my eye. She looked a bit, well, green! Shortly after she slid down her chair and onto the floor, unconscious. I was agasp. Everyone surrounded her, including the teacher. Once she came back around the student simply said she'd better go home. It wasn't till she had left did someone whisper to me that she always gets bad periods. Even when they made you faint in class, we still kept the secrecy of periods sacrosanct.

FROM PAIN TO RELAXATION

I was lucky: when my periods began, they didn't cause me any trouble. They weren't particularly regular, but the pill sorted that out. It wasn't until I went to Uni that I experienced my first period problems. I can't recall when exactly the problems began, but I do remember their peak.

I had returned home for summer to work at Neal's Yard Remedies as a part time (zero hours!) sales assistant. Being on a zero hours contract meant I could go in and out of work, picking

up shifts when it suited me. The work was pretty reliable, but you wouldn't know when or if it would suddenly dry up. So while it was available I tended to take all the shifts I could get. I would sometimes get a 14-day stint of work, but then I'd try to say no to work for 3 days after, so I could rest. A bit like some tube drivers in London do. Little did I know the effect it was having. . .

Our shop was in St. Pancras International train station. A busy train station, where all the shops have floor to ceiling clear glass fronts. For us it meant we were always on display. Like fish in a tank. I had come on my period and my cramps were hitting me pretty hard. I took myself behind the till point and kneeled on the floor to 1) sort leaflets and 2) hide. I knew it would pass. But after a few moments my manager approached (the most lovely motherly manager ever) and said "Hey Tash, you don't look so good". To which I replied "it's just cramps, it'll go soon". Even though I couldn't stand, let alone work, I wanted to wait it out. Then she said "I think you should go home, you look pretty green!" I stood up in shock and looked in the mirror. Sure enough, I looked green! I immediately rushed myself home in a haze of pain. I remember slouching on the train seat and trying to sleep it through. It took me an hour or so to get home. By the time I arrived, the pain had almost completely eased off. But this pattern would continue for years to come. It was also the beginning of an annoying type of pain cycle, and the thing that frustrated me most about this stabbing pain each month was that it only lasted a few hours at its peak and would soon drop down to a level I could function almost normally at. This meant that I would either have to plan things that I could easily cancel if I needed to, or leave my diary free for 3 days each month because of 2-5 hours of pain.

I tried paracetamol to manage my pain while working but found that it only took the edge off, while still making me feel extremely wishy-washy to the point where it was embarrassing to have me talking to customers because I looked like I was a

million miles away! I tried herbal painkillers, but to no avail. The only thing that helped was being very drunk – again not so great while at work, though surprisingly acceptable when induced by drinking copious herbal tinctures!

It took me quite some time but I eventually figured out some things that really did help:

1. Being at home with no responsibilities
2. Heat pads
3. Evening primrose oil
4. Orgasms

I even had half a year with almost no pain, achieved while using a prescription written for me by the amazing herbalist Brittany Nickerson. Through all the trials, tribulations and never ending experiments, I came to understand that my pain wasn't the result of just my periods, it was the result of how I was living every other day of the month as well.

I remember spending one period-pain-day at home, almost totally pain free. Then someone rang me and asked me if I could do something for them. I was hit by a sudden and clear cramp. This was the day I realised that, for me to be pain free, I needed to have time alone, time where I didn't have to interact with others, and felt no demands. Because I realised it was those demands that created the kind of stress in me that leads to pain.

I started trying to take more steps to have regular chill-time in the couple of weeks preceding my period. When my hormones shifted into the luteal phase and asked me to chill out, I found that, if I did this, and took my herbs, I could be completely pain free! Even when I eventually got lazy with the herbs, so long as I managed my stress throughout the month, I could make my pain manageable.