



Transcript Episode 5: The Big O.....Oh No!

Clare

Hello and welcome back to the Sex and Relationship Podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. This is the podcast where we draw on our years of experience as sex and relationship therapists. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi, Janet.

Janet

Hi, Clare.

Clare: Today we're going to be talking about - drum roll, please - today we're going to be talking about orgasms. The Big O. Oh, no! Where to begin.

Janet

Where indeed. The female orgasm, the Big O. There's been a lot of mythologizing about it over the decades, hasn't there Clare? And I think this is probably one of the most common presentations that we see as sex therapists. Would you agree?

Clare

Mmmmmm I'm pausing because I'm just not sure it's the most common. But it does come into the room on a regular basis. Yes. Difficulty with orgasms definitely comes into the room. Yeah.

Janet

Yeah. You know I have too many or I don't have enough or I don't have any or, you know, all of that are symptoms of difficulty in distress that we work with very commonly.

Clare

Absolutely. And also the kind of stories we have in our culture of what is normal and how that then negatively impacts our lived experience, because we're constantly judging ourselves and comparing ourselves to what we're believing from the kind of milieu, the societal story, is where the bar is and how our bodies should be, and it causes a great deal of pain and distress.

Janet

And as usual, female orgasm, I think traditionally, historically has been sort of measured against and compared against what male orgasm is. Male climax, which, as we know, has an evolutionary, has a as a biological function. It's about releasing sperm for conception. And I think female orgasm has been seen as just the same, but in a woman. And of course, it's, it's not like that. It's nothing like that. You know, women work very differently to men on all kinds of levels, but especially, you know, sexually. But I thought it would be a good place to start to talk about what it is. And my understanding is that an orgasm is very simply and basically a release, often a sudden release of sexual tension. No more complicated than that. And this may be conscious and it may not be conscious. And obviously, we mostly work with people who are engaging in sexual behaviour or enjoying sexual feelings and want to have an orgasm. But we know sometimes that orgasms can happen when they're not expecting it. During sleep, for example, or during exercise or riding a bike. Or sometimes women have orgasms giving birth, you know, and sometimes they're enjoyable and sometimes they're annoying, and sometimes they're not wanted and sometimes they're embarrassing. But I think we're going to be talking mainly about orgasm, you know, during sort of sexual behaviour, aren't we?

Clare

Indeed, indeed. But I suppose picking up that, you know, I would add the word elusive. Orgasms don't really like being chased. I think if you kind of set out with the goal of I'm

now going to have an orgasm, you potentially will end up frustrated. I mean, not for everybody, but for many people they are kind of a bonus.

Janet

Well, you know, I think what you sort of saying as well is that orgasm isn't about what happens in your genitals, it's about what happens in your brain, you know, when you're sort of saying about it. If you're chasing an orgasm, then you're being very conscious that that pressure is there. The anxiety about, will I have it? You know, there's this awful word that we hear people use about 'achieving' orgasm. Like, you know, that sort of goal oriented sexual behaviour that we always try and persuade people to get out of. You know, sex isn't about achieving a series of goals. An orgasm is purely about pleasure and fun. And like you said, if you're looking the other way and you sort of switch your mind off and you allow your mind to sort of become aroused as well and engaged in the simulations and the sensations and the pleasure that's happening in your body, that's when orgasm will happen, that there will be a release of that sexual pleasure and sexual tension.

Janet:

But as you also say, there can be elusive and there are lots of reasons why some women don't have orgasms when they might want one, don't have orgasms in the same way that their partner might have one, and don't have orgasms in the way that they think is expected of them as well. And the sad thing about that, of course, is if you grow up being educated by a society, by the media, by your friends, by the family, that this is how a woman is supposed to have sex and supposed to have sexual pleasure. And if you're doing it right, you know, you might have this orgasm. And then, of course, it doesn't happen like that for you, which it probably doesn't for, you know, the majority of women, I would guess. If it doesn't happen, then you sort of left, you might be left with something like, well, what's wrong with me? Why isn't it working for me like that? Because that's how we're supposed to do it. And this is where we've got into problems. And of course, women blame themselves because they don't work.

MUSIC

Clare

I think the, the, the, the notion of pleasure for many has been lost. Many women has been lost. That sex can and has for some become transactional. It's a way to get your man, land your man. And my pleasure is not relevant. So, I've seen women after they've got this lovely, lovely husband. They're married. Everything was tickety boo, but their desire has completely evaporated. And digging into that, what has emerged is her pleasure has never been in the mix of their sexual relationship. And it wasn't important for her at the front end. But as the relationship has matured and she has matured, her recognition that actually 'You're having a lovely time. I'm really not. In fact, this is kind of boring. Surely there's more to be had here'. She hadn't been raised to think of herself as being worth pleasure, needing pleasure, wanting pleasure. It wasn't part of the inherited story from her mother and grandmother and beyond.

Janet:

And listening to describe that and tell that sort of anecdote. The thing that was going through my mind was, gosh, this sounds all very 1950s housewife. And I guess that's not who you're talking, well I know it's not who you're talking about. But it's interesting, as somebody who is financially independent, who has a strong career, who knows what they want to do with their life, and you talk about landing your man or landing your woman and landing your partner and building a relationship that it's not now to do with financial dependence, thank God. You know, now it's about just having that happy partnership because I really like this person and I think we could have a good life together. Still, despite all the other gains that women have made in the last 60, 70 years, don't really understand, because of lack of education, how their sexuality works.

Clare

And what I come up against a lot in my room is, is folk so disconnected from their bodies, so estranged from themselves, they really haven't got the first clue what feels good. There's a kind of, it's become almost a cliché in our era, but there's a coming home required to yourself, you know, if that resonates for you, if you're listening and thinking, yeah, I don't know what I like. I don't know if I want a finger up my bum or not. And it's kind of like, I don't know, that's where the sort of trial and error comes in. Don't try and answer this with your head. What you need to do is answer it with your body. Your body is going to be the vehicle that will take you to this possibility of release of sexual tension. I love that definition of an orgasm. And actually what I just love about our subject today is it is entirely free. You do not need to be financially solvent. You do

not need to be highly educated. You do not even need a partner. You know you can absolutely, with nothing, have the most fantastic orgasms. And I tell you, your day will be so much better.

Janet:

And they're so good for you, aren't they.

Clare

Yes, we talked about that.

Janet:

Yes. Talk about.

Clare

Yes. They add years to your life.

Janet

Two orgasms a week. Yeah. Five years on your life, apparently.

Clare

Trustworthy sources have told Janet and I.

MUSIC

Clare

Some of us have been raised to live from the head. You know, the head is the God of the system. And the head will make all the right decisions. You know, we can recruit the head, the mind, to being an ally in this. But actually at this front end, as to quote you, if it feels good and it doesn't hurt anyone, do it. You need to work out what feels good.

Janet:

Yeah. And also, of course, you know, it's not just connecting the brain to the body and the sensations, but the brain is a really important sexual organ as well. Because what you think, what you know, you can have fantasies, you can enact things in your mind. So, think of scenarios. That's okay as well. So, you have the two things going on in

tandem. But the one thing that we want to avoid is that sense of pressure and the anxiety. And will it happen? Will it happen? Will it happen? And what happens if it doesn't happen? And they'll think that I won't fancy them anymore, and they'll think that they're not doing a good job for me. And they are. And I'm really enjoying. But do you know that anxious thinking, I mean, it's just the most unsexy thing in the world, isn't it?

Clare

And it tempts you or it can tempt you to fake it. Yeah. And deliver a performance orgasm. I mean, our era we had that wonderful when Harry Met Sally movie which had the kind of orgasm in the coffee shop. But, I mean, it's very easy to fake the most magnificent orgasm, but it absolutely is selling yourself out. You're not loving you if you choose that path because your mind is banging on about, you know he won't stay, she won't stay unless I have an orgasm. So, I'll just fake it.

Janet

And often for women, you know, I was going to say historically, but I'm sure, you know, it's very common now. Faking an orgasm is a way to end, you know, a sort of less than amazing sexual experience for them, one that perhaps they're not enjoying. And it and it is a way to end it because they feel that by, uh, you know, sort of letting the partner know that the orgasm, the partner feels good about themselves. They think that they've had a good time, and it's a way of just calling quits to everything. And I think that this leads on to, you know, something that certainly I see a lot in my sort of consulting, and I'm sure you do as well as Clare, is that if I'm seeing a couple who are presenting where the woman is having an orgasm difficulties or isn't isn't having an orgasm when he is there, and I'm going to use the generic just because it's more common. But, you know, I've worked with the same sex female couple where this has been present as well. So it's not just men, you know. Again, we're not sort of hating on men here. But it's just a more common.

Janet

But if your partner. Sees your orgasm as some sort of badge of honour as a, you know, a medal of worth. That is absolutely not okay. And I give my 'her orgasm is not your badge of honour speech' so many times because your orgasm is your own business. And if you're going to have one that day and your body is in the right mood and your mind is in the right mood, and you're going to enjoy it, well, good for you. But that's

about you. Your orgasm is not for anybody else to take any kind of worth from. You know, you can let your partner know if you're having a lovely time and all kinds of different ways. It doesn't have to be through having an orgasm, and if that's happening in your relationship or with a sexual partner of yours, then please put an end to it now, because your orgasm is about you and not about them.

MUSIC

Clare

It's very seductive though, you know the line, 'I've never had an orgasm' or 'I can't have an orgasm'. 'Oh, well, you haven't been to bed with me'.

Janet:

Yeah.

Clare

And, you know, that sort of illusion that I can be the one who's going to deliver this experience. But it's a recipe for disaster. And that when you were sharing before about faking orgasms being a way of ending a disappointing encounter. Ohh, it just made me feel so, you know, my chest just went. Oh, because if you're in that ballpark, you are using sort of nonverbal comms to get yourself out of essentially shitty situations. Really. Stop. You're worth more than that. You're better than that. Your relationship is finding ways to start talking and allowing it to be on the table of your partnership. That actually how we do sex is really boring, or how we do sex is really unfulfilling, or even how we do sex is actually really uncomfortable.

Janet

I'm glad you said that, because I was going to say it's not always shitty situations, is it? Or difficult. Sometimes it's just mediocre. And you know, it's all right. Thanks very much. But I've had enough now.

Clare

Yeah. And I got to get up in the morning and.....

Janet:

Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Or your partner might be trying really hard to please you.

Clare

Yeah.

Janet

And it's just not hitting the spot for you that day or, you know, you can't really talk about what you like or maybe you don't know what you like, so then you can't talk about what you like. This isn't top scientific stuff. This is: 'do you like that?' Yeah. No. Indifferent. 'What about this?' Better or worse? Better or worse? You know, it's like. It's as simple as that. And suck it in. See it? You know, sometimes it is trial and error.

Clare

And I think as well, I mean, part of the kind of glory and challenge of being female is our bodies are different on different days. So depending where we are, if we're premenopausal, depending where we are in our menstrual cycle, our sensitivity and our ability to enjoy pleasure varies. And I think if we're looking for the recipe for orgasm, for the, you know, if we put in a little bit of that and a little bit of that and a soupcon of that, and we shake over a bit of that and then I'll have an orgasm, it's not going to happen. Because your response to sexual stimulus will be different on different days and different at different times of your life. And this I opened by saying, you know, the glory of having a female's body is that it is a living, dynamic, vibrant thing that is constantly changing, constantly evolving. And so, you have this living, vibrant, dynamic sex life if you allow that to be so. And yes, if you're not feeling it today, they're trying so hard. They're doing all the tricks that in the past have been the ones that will push you over the edge. You're allowed to say it's not happening today. I'm not feeling it. It's allowed. You don't have to fake it.

Janet:

So sometimes it's like that. That was great. I'm done. Thank you. Brilliant. You know, and you've had a lovely experience. But I guess something that we might get asked from a woman who's been anorgasmic, who's never experienced an orgasm to their knowledge. Because that's the other thing, is sometimes, you know, a sort of a climax. An orgasm can happen without her actually noticing or understanding that that's what it

is. But I think talking about how it can feel and how different, you know, they can feel to different people. And it can be anything really from a sort of like a slight sort of hiccup, I guess, to, uh, to a sneeze to a sort of a tingly sensation to a wave of pleasure. They can be small. They can be big. They can be really intense. They can be something and nothing. Sometimes there's a pulse in. Sometimes your heart's racing and sometimes it's not. And I suppose that, you know, is varied as we are as people. And you know, then then our orgasms can vary as well, you know, according to context, you know, just referring back to what you were saying before about the conditions and our mood and how tired we are and what's going on in our relationship and where we are in the menstrual cycle or not. Or, you know, so many different factors will, will affect.

Clare

And I'd just like to add to that in terms of the range of different kinds of orgasms that a woman can enjoy is, they can also precipitate an upsurge of emotion. You can, you know, you can find yourself feeling like, you know, the lion in the jungle and there's just a great big roar of, you know, 'I'm the king of the jungle', and you can burst into tears and find yourself in uncontrollable sobbing. And you can also start hysterically laughing, and it can be a bit disconcerting. But these are all just normal parts of enjoying orgasms and trying to just be easy with that 'whoa that took me by surprise. I didn't expect to burst out laughing then. No, I'm not laughing at you, I just was... That's where it took me into feelings that I didn't anticipate'.

Janet

Yeah. So, it says the release of sexual tension. It would it would kind of make sense that it's a release of other tension as well in that moment that, you know, you sort of let go of something, you know, and your job if you want to have an orgasm, if you want to have more orgasms or figure out how how you do have an orgasm is about figuring out what makes you tick sexually. And the best place to start with that is on your own Clare.

Clare

Yeah. I mean, it just reminds me of Emily's book. Emily Nagoski Come As You Are. Your body, your way of having an orgasm.

Janet

Yeah. As sex therapists, you know, we recommend this book a lot. I promise you, we're not on commission by the publishers or from Dr Nagoski, but, we just recommend because we think it's a good book. And there's lots of great information in there about female sexuality, about the female genitalia, the clitoris, and of course about orgasm as well.

MUSIC

Clare

So, I'm just noticing the time, Janet. And I would like us to speak a little bit about, you know, if orgasms are totally elusive and what we've said so far has not kind of you thought, yeah, but when are you going to speak about me? To just get a little bit kind of specific about what you can do to to go from being somebody who doesn't have orgasms to opening to the possibility of being someone who does.

Janet

So, we set some exercises don't we call self-focus exercises, which are basically about exploration of your own body. And they're very simple. And, you know, we can recommend people to try these on their own at home. And I think the first thing to do is just kick sex out the door. Forget about it and concentrate on pleasure. So, you know, if you love a hot bath. Because really, at the end of the day, sex is just another form of touch, isn't it? You know, so let's start at the beginning.

Clare

And I think quite often we, you know, and maybe this is generational, maybe this is, you know, me turning 60 and it's, you know, younger women don't feel like this, but certainly I had to learn how the difference between looking at my body, my tummy, my knee, my feet, my armpits as an object. And what is really important here is, to be with your body as a subject. This is not primping your body, rubbing in the body lotion for someone else's gaze, for someone else's judgment. This is being with your body, for you as the subject of the touch, as the subject of the curiosity. You may want to get a little hand mirror and say hello to your vulva, you know, and not because you need to wax that bikini line because you're going to be out in public. It's to engage with this as, as your vulva. Part of you are the subject here. And. 'Hello, vulva. And how are you?'

Janet

Well, it's the view that your partner has often, isn't it? You know, and they know what you look like often in that part of your body around the entrance of the vagina and your vulva. So, lots of people don't know what they themselves look like. So absolutely. Yeah. Get the mirror out. Have a look if you don't know.

Clare

And again but having the look as not looking to be self-critical, not looking to go yuck. You know, I don't like what my vulva looks like. If there's any whiff of that, you know, put the mirror away. You're not ready for mirror work. You need to be able to be with your body as the beautiful, perfect body it is. Whatever shape it is, whatever extra bits it's got, whatever aspects of your body that societally you judge as wrong, that all needs to be left outside the door. These solo sessions where I am going to try and get to know what I like and what I like the feel of, need to have a context where I'm able to be okay with the body I have. It's my body is going to find it hard to give me accurate feedback around what I like and don't like, if it's under the gun of judgement and criticism and make wrong.

Janet

Because you know you're absolutely right. But until you have a look and until you this is normal. Whatever you look like is normal. You know, if you're inner labia or are different lengths that's normal. If they're the same length, that's normal. If they hang within the outer more fleshier parts of the labia, that's normal. But if they hang down lower than the outer that's normal as well. And I think that's the thing, isn't it? We've all got different faces and different bodies, and your vulva is no different. And whatever it looks like is normal. And there's that big art installation, isn't there? I mean, it's wrongly called the wall of vagina, but it should be called the wall of vulva, shouldn't it? But I guess that that doesn't rhyme with China. But do you know, have a look at it. Look it up if you haven't seen it already. It's about 100. 200 different plaster casts of, of vulvas from women aged, I think 16 to 18. And, and they're all different of course, because we're all different. So, normalise what you look like and get used to seeing that part of your body. And then trace, you know, trace a finger around it as you look in as well, because then you're marrying up the visuals with the sensations. And then if somebody, if you allow somebody else to touch you there, you're going to know exactly where they are, which

part of you it is because you understand it. You've seen it yourself. You've been there first.

Clare

I'm so glad you've brought the word 'normal' into the conversation. You know, I just hear all the time, Clare, am I normal? Is this normal? You know, I'm just thinking of younger women who are listening. Do you know, in this era of Instagram and Facebook and the bombardment of images of what could be considered 'normal', do you know whether it's your nose, whether it's your ears, whether it's your breasts, your body is normal. It's your body and it's the body you've got to integrate and befriend. Get to know it, get to know your body.

Janet

The parts that you're not going to see is where, you know, some of the magic happens. And that also is the thing about female anatomy. You know, in a man, generally their sexual organs are on the outside, but with women in the vulva, just at the top of the vulva is the sort of small, pee sized little structure, which may be hooded. It maybe not, but that is the clitoris. And for, oh my goodness, decades and decades and decades and decades it was thought that that was the entire clitoris. And the full anatomy of the clitoris we have Professor Helen O'Connell, an Australian urologist, to thank for this, because she's spent years fighting the dearth in funding research into female sexuality. And she finally got enough funding to look into the anatomy, the full anatomy of the clitoris. And what she found was that the clitoris, far from being, you know, this small little pea sized shape at the top of the vulva is actually maybe 3 or 4in long and from the tip that lies in the external part of the vulva, it goes in. And then there were two sort of bulbs that then lie around the vaginal walls in the pelvic area.

Janet

And so there are different ways and places to stimulate the clitoris, which may then help you get to a point where you have an orgasm. And during intercourse, you know, the vast majority of women, about three quarters do not have an orgasm just through either penile or finger penetration or sex or penetration alone, that generally there will be some clitoral stimulation externally and internally. And this is where it comes down to engineering and logistics, Clare, you know, if two people's bodies just fit together very

fortunately in a way that the, you know, the clitoral glands or bulbs in when intercourse is happening, that it's stimulated, then it's more likely that you're going to have an orgasm because you're receiving more stimulation around that area. But if you understand the anatomy and if you don't know what the full anatomy of the clitoris looks like, go and look it up. Because once you understand your anatomy, then obviously, you can use that knowledge and you can try different things to figure out what works best for you.

Clare

Engineering.

Janet

Engineering.

Clare:

I think the couples who find the fit magically are very few and far between. I think it really is a trial and error, experimental together to just get the engineering just in the right place to where the orgasm occurs. But that's not the ultimate goal. The goal is 'am I experiencing pleasure moment to moment to moment?' And if I'm not, just heard the baby crying, I've just heard the dog barking. I've just heard a strange crash downstairs. You know, anything like that could take your attention away from your pleasure. That's fine. It doesn't mean abandon the project. It just means there's going to be a pause and then we'll come back and play some more and see where it takes us. Just to be present as much as you can in right here, right now. Am I enjoying this?

Janet

That seems to be a good place to end, Clare. Am I enjoying this? You know, always when you're thinking about sex, when you're talking about sex with with a partner, that's the bottom line. Do I like this? Do you like this? Why are you today? What am I in the mood for? And put down these images that we've all been soaked with since childhood about what good sex looks like. Because most of it, honestly, it's nonsense.

Clare

Oh, Janet, as ever so lovely to sit here and chew the cud with you over a subject we tend to do on our own with our clients. You know, it's really, really valuable chatting. And

thank you for joining us and listening to Janet. And I have this chat today. If you want to read more about what we've been talking about, then please do visit our website: thesexandrelationships podcast.com, that's thesexandrelationships podcast.com. If you have any questions for us to explore in our chats, you can leave us a message on the website. We're also on social media and we are really, really looking forward to hearing from you. Absolutely lovely chatting with you today, Janet. Until next time. Bye bye.

Janet:

Bye, Clare.