

Vaginismus: An Existential View on Sexual Difficulties



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Introduction

Some women experience a condition known as vaginismus that makes sexual intercourse difficult or even impossible because of anxiety induced muscle tension that prevents optimal relaxation in intimate situations. About 0.49 % of women between fifteen and twenty-four in the UK have experienced this. However, existential psychology has been slow to recognize this condition despite its gender related nature. I will therefore discuss the matter from the perspective of gender philosophy through the existential work of Simone de Beauvoir and the concepts of embodiment and being in relationships. Below follows a summary of de Beauvoir's theoretical work and my own therapeutical experience with one of my own clients, Dolores, with whom I used existential tools on sexual issues.

Existentialist Philosophy and Gender

Existential philosophy does not see gender as an important factor for describing individual differences because of its focus upon the global experience of being, mortality, choice, and coping with relations to others.

But it stands to reason that we all are different individuals due to the time we were born, our gender, and many other conditioning factors. We are individuals in everything, including our physical body, culture, mind, and views [1]. It is obvious that such factors also are of great influence on sexual matters expressed by de Beauvoir's famous adage 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman'.

Although the human condition, according to Sartre, demands that we free ourselves from whatever is imposed upon us from other people, nevertheless these needs are not identical for every group. De Beauvoir is talking about individuals that are prevented from 'breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads' because they are forced to stay in dependency, ignorance and servitude, like slaves that unaware of their own condition. This is true of many women in various parts of the world who find themselves in a situation given to them. De Beauvoir thus makes an addition to Sartre's general views by describing the effects of the hierarchical structure of society upon individual

freedom of choice. There is, in effect, a significant difference between Western societies and slaves in that, according to de Beauvoir, the Western woman has chosen security and shelter before freedom while at the same time combating her master because she wants both security and freedom.

Woman and Her Relationship to Her Body

There are certain developmental stages where boys are conditioned to seek freedom and focus on individuality, see *The Second Sex* [2]. This stands in contrast to girls who are encouraged to remain passive and regard their body as something that must be beautiful. Therefore women are never independent and their movement is heavily restricted. De Beauvoir [2] describes the consequences of this for young women in that it leads to a weak sense of self and difficulties of perceiving their body as something normal. Therefore women need support and to stay sexually passive. However, the result is sexual ambivalence, failure to enjoy her looks and failure to enjoy sex.

De Beauvoir was a spokesperson for the reaction of the Feminist Movement against the medial exploitation of the female body. There was a change of control in the sense that instead of men keeping an eye on women this had shifted towards the women themselves [3]. As Foucault noticed [4], instead of having the police to do police work, people now were policing themselves. For women this meant responding to this shift by seeking glamour just to impress each other.

Being-For-Others

This shift from being 'for-oneself' to being 'for-others' meant that many women lost their sense of self and traded it with the perspective of others thus aspiring to becoming an object, i.e. objects of desire for the opposite gender [2]. When women asked about future plans they put marriage first which never has been a primary goal in life for the other gender. This inner conflict may lead, and does lead, to the development of resentment and a sense of animosity within the context of relationships among women when they realize the nature of their sacrifice. Add to this the hostility and repulsion towards herself when her efforts

do not have the desired outcome: to make the opposite gender happy.

Woman's objective in life is reduced to make men crazy about her even if that reduces her action space into a game arena where she plays inaccessible hoping this way to trap an equally idealized version of the opposite gender to fall in love and marry her [5]. Needless to say, this behavior becomes a vicious circle: 'The less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as a subject'. This is confusion at all levels and has its source, according to de Beauvoir, from mothers who condition their daughters to embark upon the same road as they have. Their motive is partly generated from regarding the freedom of their offspring as a potential existential hazard because it serves as a reminder of their own lost freedom - that they could in fact have made a different choice and could have resisted the role that was imposed upon them.

This of course has consequences among which we see worry about independence, fear of being criticized by others which force women into attempts at control of the situation by making themselves beautiful in the face of natural processes such as aging. When these women reach middle age they are prone to developing an identity crisis that leads to depression once they realize they have no-one to take care of anymore, that no one needs them once their kids have moved elsewhere [5]. For individuals who only know how to please others and keep monitoring how their efforts are received, choice becomes exceedingly difficult.

Clinical Aspects of Working with Vaginismus

The existential take on sexual issues builds on the fact that some people tend to become rigid in their views, and when that has happened I can assist in discovering alternatives and present them as choice. It was important for me to examine my own perceptions on sex to ascertain I stayed non-judgmental. It seemed Dolores did not think much of herself as a girlfriend and generally did not have much self-esteem either. The main focus of sexual therapy is usually directed towards ontical factors relating to vaginismus; however, my approach to Dolores and her situation concerned facts about her and what it meant to her. Instead of putting a label onto her I wanted to understand the story her symptoms were telling me. Vaginismus may be related to one partner only but Dolores had faced this problem with each single partner she ever had a relation with.

Dolores avoided to deal with expressions of emotions such as shame, regret, or her frustration during her sessions because to do so would evoke embarrassment, thus confirming the interpretation that she was out of touch with her own being [6-10].

Cultural factors and her views and attitudes towards herself as a total entity were the subject of exploration and I managed to help her to include sexuality as a valid component in herself as a being-in-the world. It was evident that she never had acknowledged her sexuality and was not engaging in the world as a being with sexual needs. The distinctions made by Sartre about the body for-self and for-others and how it is understood by others, was also helpful. It struck me then that Dolores was only aware of ontical factors and never paid any attention to ontology. That is, she couldn't connect her sexual engagement with the way she maintained her vaginismus. Twelve sessions raised her awareness about what went on and the reasons behind her change on sexual matters. She started to talk more authentically about her preferences with her boyfriend and began to regard herself as a sexual being with sexual needs in the world. The lack of intimacy in her relationships had made her isolated from others, and it was this distance from others that required a closer look. Cultural factors proved to be important in her views and attitudes toward herself as a total entity

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