

MEDITATION

Real Talk: Lisa Hendrickson-Jack On Optimizing Health Through The Menstrual Cycle

WRITTEN BY ASHLEIGH DELUCA
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Lisa Hendrickson-Jack is a Toronto-based author, podcast host, certified fertility awareness educator, and certified holistic reproductive health practitioner. For our "Real Talk" series, we asked Lisa about her experience learning to understand her own menstrual cycle and her work with clients to help them better understand their cycles, regulate their periods, and optimize their fertility.

Can you share your own story of learning to understand your menstrual cycle, what it told you about your health, and how it inspired you to become a fertility awareness educator?

My very first periods were heavy and painful so I went on a pill when I was about 15. It was like magic because my pill periods became very easy and simple. But anytime I tried to stop taking the pill, my true periods would come back with a vengeance. And even though I was still pretty young, I quickly started to get a sense that the pill was not actually fixing my problem.

I initially learned about the fertility awareness method from a speaker at my college. Not long after, I joined a group of women who were teaching the fertility awareness method and this is where I learned to chart my cycle. One day, one of the group instructors looked at my chart and told me that my cycles were too long and my temperatures were too low and that I should get a thyroid test.

I went to the doctor and learned that my thyroid was, in fact, low. This blew my mind, that someone could look at your chart and tell you something about your health. And that's when I learned that the menstrual cycle is intimately connected with health. This is where it all began for me. So I continued to be part of that group and took fertility awareness training and then began teaching the method.

You published a book last year about the menstrual cycle called The Fifth Vital Sign: Master Your Cycles & Optimize Your Fertility. **Can you explain why the menstrual cycle is now considered to be a vital sign?**

A big reason why the menstrual cycle is considered a vital sign is that it is a huge, incredible biomarker in women and girls that can tell us so much about health. Just by incorporating the question of "when was your last cycle?" and "are you cycling normally?" a practitioner can really ascertain—if they have a good background—what's happening to a woman's health.

And it makes sense that the menstrual cycle is a vital sign because if a reproductive-aged woman is not bleeding regularly and is not having regular ovulation, it is a problem. The only time that an ovulatory cycle is going to be disrupted is when there is something going on with an individual's health.

What does a healthy menstrual cycle look like and what are your thoughts on using birth control pills to regulate periods?

A healthy ovulatory menstrual cycle can range from about 24 to 35 days with an average of 29 days. A cycle is then considered irregular if it varies more than eight days from cycle to cycle. This is helpful to understand because a lot of women worry that their cycle is irregular if it is sometimes 32 days and other times 27 days. They worry when it's not always 28 days. But we are not robots! There is some degree of cycle fluctuation that is normal.

But for those who have irregular periods, it is important to understand some of the common underlying issues that can cause irregularity. They are polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), hypothalamic amenorrhea, gut problems, and inflammation. And it is also important to understand that the pill does not fix these underlying health problems.

Here is an example of why the pill does not fix these issues. Let's say I buy a house that I'm not ready to use right now. And, in the house, there's a huge leak in one of its pipes and it's leaking everywhere. Now let's say I just shut off the water and go about my business for five years until I'm ready to move into the house. When I go back to this house and turn on the tap, water is still going to leak everywhere because I never fixed the broken pipe. This is what the pill does—it just shuts down the cycle entirely.

The process of regulating an irregular cycle will understandably be different for each woman depending on their health status but what are the first steps that can be taken to begin addressing an irregular period?

The first step is recognizing that an irregular cycle is a symptom of an underlying problem. It is easy to say that an irregular period is the problem but the cycle is only irregular because there is an imbalance in the body. Think of it this way, if someone has a fever it's for a reason. They have a fever because there's an underlying issue that is causing it to happen. So, the first step is to appreciate this and understand this concept of the menstrual cycle being a vital sign.

Then go through all of the myths about the menstrual cycle. The biggest myths are that the cycle is always 28 days, ovulation always happens on day 14, and that we are fertile every single day. None of these things are true. There is only a small window of fertility in the cycle and it is six days long. A menstrual cycle can vary and that means that ovulation can vary as well.

Then start at a very basic level. You want to ask yourself: are you getting good sleep, are you eating three square meals a day, how much do you exercise? It is important to first look at the basics to better understand your health.

The next step is simply to start paying attention to your periods. You can do this by downloading an app like the Read Your Body app. Then the next step after this is to start paying attention to your cervical fluid.

With that said, it is also important to understand that there is not just one magical thing that is going to fix an irregular period for everybody because there are different issues that can cause irregularity in different people.

Period pain seems to be a common symptom for many women. What does it mean and why is this pain commonly minimized?

Although period pain is very common, it is not normal. Outside of childbirth, I can't think of any other situation where we think that pain is totally normal. We usually think of moderate-to-severe pain as a sign of a problem.

Today women still have their pain minimized and, sometimes, even by medical professionals. Women still have a difficult time being heard and understood and believed. Sure, we as women minimize our own pain, but we also live in a world that minimizes our pain.

If any male friend, partner, or family member experienced searing pain in their penis for a couple of days each month that put them on the floor we would not think that was normal. But, for some reason, we have rationalized that menstrual pain is okay for women and that it's just part of being a woman.

There is scientific evidence that shows that women who have significant period pain have higher levels of inflammation. This means that it's not in their heads. It means that it's a real problem. And if we know that inflammation is at its root then we can address it. We need to have better solutions for period pain. Women deserve to live their lives without being in pain every single cycle.

As a certified fertility awareness educator you work with women to help them decode their menstrual cycles. Based on your experience working with your clients, what is the one thing you wished more women knew about their cycles?

One thing that I wish all women knew is that the pill is not the be-all-end-end-all for birth control or period problems. One of the comments I hear most from my clients when they find me is, *I wish I would have found you sooner.* I wish I would have known that there was another option for me in terms of how to prevent pregnancy. I wish I would have known that the pill doesn't actually give me a period and that it wasn't actually fixing my cycle. I wish I would have known that there were other ways to normalize my cycle.

I don't think that every woman on Earth needs to use the fertility awareness method because there is no one method that is going to work for all women at all times of their life. What I do think is that all women have the right to understand what's happening in their cycles.



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Ashleigh N. DeLuca is a freelance journalist and copywriter living in New York. She is a firm believer in empowering women to live their best lives by taking control of their health. When she isn't writing you can find her nose deep in the latest research about women's health or hanging out with her cat. You can read more about Ashleigh and visit her website at ashleighndeluca.com or on Twitter @AshleighNDeLuca.

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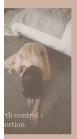
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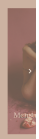
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