SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

The Shame of Pain, and How to Fix It

with Kate O'Connor · Day 4, Thursday, October 29 · The Unfamiliar Feelings

If you clicked on this talk, then I'm guessing that you're living with pain. I'm not a doctor. I'm not a medical professional. But you are in the right place because we are going to get into it. I want you to know, first of all, that it is a really big fucking deal if you have pain. As women, we're taught from birth through osmosis to push through and keep on living life, basically because we have to. Society is not set up for anything else. The medical system is not supportive. And part of the patriarchal conditioning, which I call the invisibility wound, is that women endure unpleasant touch. We endure discomfort and we endure pain. We are taught that we must always prioritize how other people feel. So in other words, your job as a woman is to never make anyone else uncomfortable with your thoughts or your feelings, even if it is at the expense of your own well-being. And so I know that it doesn't feel like a big deal, that you're living with pain, but it is. It is a really big fucking deal. And I want you to know that. I want you to take credit for it. Living with pain is exhausting. It is distracting. It is depressing and it's debilitating. And yet, here you are. I celebrate you. I bow down to you. I think that you're amazing. I think that you deserve better. And I really, really, really witness you doing the hardest thing.

My name is Kate O'Connor. I'm a mindset coach for women, and I'm here to talk to you about the shame of pain.

So I'm going to start with my own story. I'm looking at notes here to make sure that I don't get off track. And as is the case for many women with ADHD, I was a late bloomer. So I had my only child at 43. I remember visiting my partner's grandparents to introduce them to the baby and I talked to his grandmother. This woman is amazing. She's in her 90s and she's had 15 children. And she asked me, so what was the most surprising thing about becoming a mother? And without thinking about the question, I just said what was on my mind, and I said, the pain. The most surprising thing has been how much pain I'm in. And I remember she just stared at me like she actually looked shocked and she looked quite confused. And as is the case for most women of her generation, she very politely changed the subject. But I remember thinking about that look that she gave me over and over and over again and feeling embarrassed and actually feeling like, okay, it's confirmed. There's definitely something wrong with me.

I had expected postpartum pain. You learn about this in birthing classes, right? You learn that after giving birth, everything that happened in your body to make room for the baby and to make your body pliable so that the baby could come out. All of those hormones plummet. And as your body starts going back to normal, it can be very painful. So I experienced that pain and it felt debilitating, but then it didn't go away.

My child is three, okay? And one day I want to say six months ago I was scrolling on Facebook and I saw the post of a woman who I've been following and she has been sharing her journey with perimenopause. She has been very open about the fact that over the past few years, she was suffering so much that she became suicidal, and then she figured out that all of her symptoms were to do with

perimenopause. So she was finally prescribed hormone replacement therapy. And she has been sharing about how that brought her back off the ledge and probably saved her life. And somewhere along the way, in all of her posts about the changes, the solutions, the like before and after, I read about musculoskeletal pain and I stopped in my tracks and all of a sudden I realized that this was not postpartum pain. This is perimenopause.

After almost three years of thinking that there was something wrong with me, I realized suddenly that it wasn't my fault. I have been in pain. I have had pain in my feet, pain in my ankles, pain in my knees, pain in my hips, in my lower back, in my upper back, in my shoulders, in my neck, in my knuckles, in my wrists. I have had pain at night. I have had pain during the day. I have had pain when I'm moving. I have had pain when I've been at rest. I would wake up in the middle of the night and feel like I could barely move because of pain. I remember at one point, my father in law watched me struggle to stand up from the couch, and he was like, you look like you're 80 years old. Except that my mother is 83 and she has more mobility and energy than I do. I have been in pain for no fucking reason. And all of a sudden, after two and a half years of this, I read this woman's post on Facebook and suddenly realized that this is perimenopause. Musculoskeletal syndrome of menopause. This is a newly recognized condition that affects 70% of women. Think about that. Something as extreme as pain that can affect 35% of the world's entire population is newly recognized. It just puts into context how the medical system doesn't understand or prioritize women's health.

Anyway, let me try and stay on track. Okay. So why? Why did it take me almost three years to figure out that I was not having postpartum pain, and that I was having musculoskeletal syndrome of menopause? It took me this long because of shame. I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I was so old when I had a child, when I decided to try and get pregnant, when I decided to have a child. Ashamed that I waited too long, that I couldn't get my shit together, that it took me so long to find a partner that I couldn't get my financial footing, that my career wasn't completely established. Ashamed that I had a baby and was obviously, like, too old and too weak and too decrepit. And that that must be the reason why my postpartum pain has been lasting so long, and that it's my fault. Because that's what we do, right? I was ashamed that I wasn't stronger or better, somehow or more organized, that I wasn't able to, like, get up and get out and get back to the gym or get the right supplements, or have the proper diet. Basically, ashamed that I wasn't a completely different, like, well-put-together person.

Somehow, despite all of my experience coaching women on self-attack, the shame sneaked in and had me feeling like my pain was my fault. All my fault. Shame is when you think that there is something wrong with you, and that is what our society tells us about pain. It makes you think that it's all your fault. It makes you think that you should have been taking better care of yourself. If you were thinner, if you were fitter. You wouldn't have pain. If you were exercising and dieting, you wouldn't have pain. If you were more disciplined, you wouldn't have pain, right? We're told this if you have back pain, if you have migraines, if you have anxiety, if you're still having grief. We're told that there must be something wrong with you.

In fact, as women, we are told that if you have any negative emotions, which, by the way, come from the same area in your brain as pain, that there's something wrong with you and that is your fault. And if you admit that you have pain, then people will see you as a failure. So you hide it.

I mean, it's the exact same with fat shame, right? We're told that it's our own fault that you're not disciplined enough. You're not trying hard enough. It's fucking bullshit. 96% of diets don't work. Weight is hereditary. Okay, I'm calling complete bullshit. I'm calling complete and utter bullshit. It is not your fault. Nothing is wrong with you. It is not your fault. What's wrong is that women have not been studied or supported by the medical system or this patriarchal society. Women's pain is ignored. It is minimized, it is belittled, and it's time to stop.

So let me just bring my own tale to an end. I spoke to my doctor, okay? Turns out that he's clueless about women's health. And I'm on a continuing journey to figure that side of things out. But for a while, I started taking the pill estrogen and progesterone, and I couldn't really tell if it was helping.

But one day, after about a month of being on the pill, I was out for dinner at one of our regular places and the bathroom is in the basement. And as I started walking down the stairs, I suddenly had a flashback of the last time I had been walking down the stairs. So this time I was walking down with ease, just walking down stairs without hesitation, not thinking about it, but in that moment, I flashed back to the last time I was walking down those stairs and could see myself gripping the railing on the side of the wall and stomping down each step, feeling the stiffness in my knees and my hips just holding on to the railing because stairs felt that difficult. I hadn't truly realized until that moment just how bad things had gotten, until they were different and improved, and I could actually compare.

There are solutions. As I said, I'm not a medical professional. I'm not here to offer you those solutions. What I'm here to offer you is the thing that happens before you find a solution. You don't have to be in pain, but you can't get there alone. Why can't you do it alone? Because one, you don't have the resources or the capacity, and you shouldn't have to. You shouldn't have to magically, somehow know what you don't know. And that's why you need to get help. And two, you're just not fucking meant to do it alone. We're not meant to do any of this alone. You deserve support. You deserve information. You deserve access to the solutions for your pain.

So that brings me to the final part of this talk. How? How do we fix the shame? Because the shame is the thing that's stopping you from getting what you need. The secrecy and the self-blame, the masking and the enduring. It's such a juicy combination that makes it so that we just don't have access to anything we need. So let's talk about it. How do you eradicate shame if you have shame in any area of your life about anything? Here we go.

There is one way to eradicate shame and it is through sisterhood. Community. Snitching on yourself so that you are no longer alone. It is easier than you think. And please listen to this and let this land: the reason why it feels difficult is simply because you have to learn how to do it. That's all. Learning means you suck at it at first. It's like a skill that you don't have. That's all. You keep doing it. You practice, you put in reps, you get better. It is literally as simple as that. The main thing you have to do is be willing to suck at something which feels impossible.

Let me continue. Sisterhood and community. There are two ways that you can go about this. Number one is what I call structured sisterhood. This is my name for communities where there are very strict rules about how everybody holds space for one another and how everyone engages in my community. This means rules such as never giving unsolicited advice, never offering someone a fix, because that

assumes that something is broken, and you are not broken. The system is broken. You are not. Okay. Structured sisterhood means learning how to truly make one another feel seen, heard and understood in their pain, in their suffering, in what they're going through. So helping them feel like they're not alone and they're not to blame, but rather that they're being honored.

So structured sisterhood is the safest way to let your pain be seen, right? Because you know that you can show up in one of these communities or online groups, and you can say whatever you're going to say and you will only be supported. But you can also find this type of solace in your own community outside of a coaching container.

You need to make a decision to end the secrecy. You can start with yourself, even just noticing what shame you're carrying. You can do this in writing, like noticing where you're blaming yourself, what you're ashamed of. Write a big long list. And this can be a difficult thing to do alone, because sometimes we write out all the mean things and we're like, oh my God, I can't believe I was telling myself this. It's so mean. And it's like, definitely not true. But sometimes you read it and you're just like, oh, it's all true. By the way, it's not. They're lies. These are just habitual thought patterns. Mean things are not true. But if you feel like you're going to get sucked into thinking that they're true, you can do this with a friend.

So I want you to find your most non-judgmental, supportive friend and ask them to only witness you. Give them some very strict rules: "I'm going to read this list to you, and I want you to only tell me that you witness me, that anyone experiencing this pain would naturally feel this way, and that it is perfectly reasonable, and that I am so, so, so loved in this confession." If you want, you should even get them to write down what they're going to say to you when they respond so that they don't go off script. And you can also ask them for words of comfort or reassurance.

The most important thing is to be very specific in how they should respond, so that they don't start giving you advice. We don't need someone saying, "Well, you should try my acupuncturist," or, "You know, if you stop eating gluten, it'll change your life." It is not the time and place for that, so we don't need that right now. Thank you. And if you do want advice, that's fine. But that is a separate conversation. That is not to do with shame. That is to do with gathering resources and getting information. Is that clear? This is about eradicating shame.

Okay, let's take a deep breath. What I want to leave you with is this. For a couple of thousand years, women have been systematically separated from our own power. We weren't allowed to own property. We weren't allowed to learn to read. We weren't allowed to earn our own money. We weren't allowed to be healers or spiritual leaders. Women have been separated from all of the ways that we could lead and own our own life.

And so what that meant was there were only a few ways to survive in society. Pay attention, because this is going to blow your mind, unless you watch Bridgerton. The only ways to survive in society were to become a nun or to become a sex worker, because courtesans were some of the only women allowed to be educated and to earn and own. And obviously that was for the benefit of men, because who doesn't want to spend their time with a brilliant woman? But the only way to really survive in society for a couple of thousand years was to be good marriage material. Think about this. Good marriage material was the

only way to survive. And what that means is we learned that we have to be perfect. Never too much, never too little. Never a mess, never cranky, never in need.

We carried this perfectionism down through generations, and it still shows up even in sisterhood. We hate to show our weakness. We wait until we're good again and then return to the light. Except that the time when you need it the most is the time that you're hiding. So this perfectionism shows up in how we show ourselves and also how we receive one another, right? The discomfort and compulsion that women have to police ourselves and to police other women is real. So basically, when we see another woman in pain, we either want to give her advice or almost blindly blame her, too. And so this needs to be unlearned. And luckily, as I said earlier, all of this is just about learning. You keep putting in reps and you get better. We have done it. We can do it. We are doing it.

So understand that. That history is why it feels so difficult to let yourself show up and be in pain. It feels like showing up messy is the thing that's going to get you shunned out of the group: unpopular, not cool, a fraud, a fake, weak, pathetic, whatever the mean things are, whatever the shame milkshake that you're drinking is, we have that fear. And I just say that to put it into perspective, that it's not your fault, that you feel that way. There are reasons, historical context, that it feels that way.

But you showing up messy is the thing that makes you more lovable, not less. More relatable. More intimacy, more connection when we share these parts of ourselves, right? More friendship, more love. Okay, we live in a society that wants us to ignore our pain. And I fucking refuse to put up with that. And let's be real, this is a summit on perimenopause. So ignoring bullshit is not really on the table for any of us anymore.

So listen, your mission from here is this. Share. Share. Share your shame. Share yourself. Snitch on yourself. Put it into the light of sisterhood. And let it drift away. Like opening a box of smoke. On the other side you will find answers. You will find solutions. You will find women willing to advocate for you and with you. And most importantly, you will no longer be alone.

So the freebie that I'm offering to go along with this is called The Art of Engorgement. And what it is is a single lesson and a deep diving workbook on how to find pleasure. Because I know from my journey of pain that in order to turn down the volume of my pain in my body, I also have had to turn down the volume of pleasure. So The Art of Engorgement is all about all the different types of pleasure. There are so many that you haven't considered, dreamed of, thought of, learned about all on the table for you. Because pleasure is a way to find endurance. If you're going after a goal or you need to do any hard thing, that lesson will help you create your own engorgement list. And it is my hope that not only does it help you find your way to navigate pain, but it unlocks pleasure for you in every area of your life, forever and ever. Amen.

Thank you. Thank you for listening. I love you and here's to us doing this together.