



His Sympathy Cramps

As a trans man, PJ started taking hormones in college, and his period stopped. But once he met Zoë, the two started experiencing premenstrual syndrome (PMS) together. We hear about their discomfort, acceptance, and love. We also talk to a doctor who unpacks PMS for us.

PJ Brooks: *I started my period at eleven. Um, I remember when I started growing breasts. And, like, they're like hard lumps, on your chest, and they hurt to touch. And I was like, "What is going on?"*

My name's PJ Brooks. I'm a trans man. And um...I no longer have periods technically but yeah, I still experience some stuff...

Narration: Welcome to Feeling My Flo, a podcast for all things period. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.

PJ uses he/him pronouns. He grew up in California and Arizona in a big family. And, like all of us, he wasn't sure when that first period was going to happen. At age eleven, it came unexpectedly on a day that PJ was at his grandmother's house.

PJ: I think I called my mom...and I was like, "I'm bleeding from my vagina right now and I don't know what's going on." And she was like, "I think you just started your period." And I was like, "I'm freaking out, like...what do I do next?"

Narration: PJ's mom told him to tell his grandmother. She took him to the store to buy pads. Periods were a reality for PJ now, and that was pretty tough for him.

PJ: Every single period, I'm, like, constantly reminded that I have a uterus and, like, I don't want one. And I'm bleeding for no reason and I don't even, like, want to birth kids...so I'm just there with my thoughts.

Narration: Having a period can cause gender dysphoria which sometimes happens to people who experience a mismatch between their bodily appearance or function and their gender identity. This was the case for PJ, who came out as trans in college. But we'll get to that later in the episode.

Luckily, as PJ was entering into his teenage years, he found someone to lean on: his mom. They grew really close.

PJ: I have so many great memories with my mom. But, I think one great memory was my fifteenth birthday. Uh, she got the day pass for Universal Studios and for Disneyland and we basically spent the whole weekend together.

She knew I was getting into film and art, so that's why she took me to Universal Studios and I was like, "You know what? Like, you *listen* to me."

Narration: At the time of the Disneyland trip, it had been four years since that first period. And, PJ noticed that in the days *before* his body menstruated, he'd get really bad cramps.

PJ: After the first time, it progressively got heavier. So every period from then got heavier and heavier and worse and worse. By high school, I was taking Vicodins for my cramps, um, and I was leaving school early every first day because it would be so bad that I just, I couldn't focus. I couldn't do anything.

Narration: What PJ's describing is called PMS, or premenstrual syndrome. And when we started digging into PMS for this episode, we found out there's a lot of information flying around about what it is and how it affects people.

We wanted to get a medical opinion. So, our producer Mia went to visit Dr. Yael Swica, a board-certified family physician.

Dr. Swica is a professor of family medicine at Columbia University and runs a women's health practice in New York City.

Dr. Yael Swica: ...and so when people talk about PMS, it can mean a lot of things. But the main thing it means is that there's a change.

Narration: Dr. Swica says about 80% of people report different kinds of mood or physical changes in the days leading up to menstruation. And sometimes they continue into your period.

Dr. Swica: The symptoms themselves are really common. Uh, bloating, back ache, joint ache, exhaustion....like just a profound tiredness for no good reason. With respect to emotional or psychological or psychiatric symptoms...feeling really sad. Discouraged. Negative thoughts about yourself. About the people you think love you. Poor sleep. And even, uh, night sweats.

Narration: But, the thing about PMS is that everyone has their *own* experience of it. Take me, for example. I tend to get ravenous cravings for meat, my body bloats, and my emotions just get intense. Just the other day, I found myself crying over a bunch of puppies in the window of a pet store and the fact that I couldn't take one home. I mean, I like animals, but not *that* much.

That's what *my* PMS is like, but depending on the symptoms, there are options for how to treat them.

Dr. Swica: There are ways to minimize the pain and bleeding if that's what's happening for you, either by using over-the-counter medicine like Ibuprofen, or Advil, or Motrin. The birth control pill can reduce pain and bleeding tremendously. But, if you really feel like it's interfering with your ability to be you, then you should seek treatments.

Narration: That's just what PJ did when his PMS was interfering with his life.

PJ: I had went to a doctor. She just kind of prescribed me some pain medication and that...that was that.

Narration: Fast forward a few years, and PJ's life started changing in some big ways. He started college. And because of the hormones he was taking, he wasn't experiencing menstruation anymore.

PJ: So now that I don't have a period...it was like, *Thank God I don't have this anymore*. I don't have to spend money on things that I don't need, you know, pads and, like, medications.

Narration: College is also where PJ met someone special.

Zoë Johnson: Can I just take my jacket off? Is that okay?

Kamilah Kashanie: If you're comfortable taking it off, 'cause I feel like you want to move when you talk.

Zoë: Because I move a lot when I talk. I'm sorry, I'm very expressive. I can't help it.

Narration: That's Zoë Johnson, PJ's girlfriend when we interviewed them. She's cisgender, which means her gender identity matches with what she was assigned at birth. And her pronouns are she and her. They first met through a mutual friend in their college cafeteria.

PJ: She commented on my basketball shorts one time. Literally one time...and I developed a crush right after that.

Zoë: I – I literally was just like, “You look nice.” Like, “I like your outfit.” And then he like looked at me, and...he was like...like, the way you said thank you is, like, the cutest. Because you were like, “Thank you?”

PJ: I was confused!

Zoë: [Laughs.]

Narration: PJ and Zoë started spending a lot of time together. They *really* clicked.

Zoë: There’s a lot of love. There’s nothing but love.

PJ: Definitely more than...

Zoë: It’s hard to...to sum up something this amazing in one word.

PJ: But it’s also hard to sum up something so complex as well. ‘Cause I think our relationship’s very complex.

Narration: Part of that complexity initially had to do with Zoë’s period. Every month, when Zoë’s PMS set in, she would start cramping and craving certain foods.

Zoë: Am I mean when I get my period?

PJ: I mean, sometimes you can get a little bit snappy, but I think it’s only when, like, you haven’t eaten, um, and then I know I have to feed you.

Zoë: [Laughs.]

PJ: I mean, her favorite food is nachos. A lot of the time, it’s pasta. I like to fill her up with, like, stuff so she can feel comfortable and then, like, go to sleep.

Narration: But, every time Zoë started PMSing, PJ started cramping right alongside her.

PJ: We usually get cramps around the same time. And that’s what really irritates me.

Narration: They call them PJ’s “sympathy cramps.”

PJ: I mean, there was a time recently, um, I think right before you got your period.

Zoë: Yeah.

PJ: We were both at work. And I had gotten really, really bad cramps. And so

it's like, those moments...I'm, like, *Dude*. You know, I get it's cute, but it's, like, not cute.

Zoë: The idea of it is cuter than actually living it.

Narration: Their “sympathy cramps” reminded me of another instance when a person experiences the physical symptoms of a loved one. It’s called sympathetic pregnancy. It happens when otherwise healthy cisgender men experience pregnancy-related symptoms while their partners are pregnant. Things like abdominal pain, backaches, or even changes in appetite.

Narration: For Zoë and PJ, when they sat down to talk about it, they ended up reflecting on some deeper aspects of their relationship.

PJ: It’s definitely a weird thing in our relationship because sometimes she forgets that I’ve had a period *before*...um...

Zoë: That’s because I think your transness is, like, more impressed upon, like, you than it is on me. Because I just see you as, like, PJ, a guy...and you see yourself as, like, PJ the trans man. Sometimes.

PJ: Yeah.

Zoë: So like...it doesn’t register to me that you have had a period, which I feel like it should.

PJ: I mean, it doesn’t really matter either way. But the reality of it is, when she bleeds through her pants, I’m like, “You don’t have to be embarrassed. Like, I’ve bled through my pants before. We just gotta do this and this and you’re going to be okay.”

Narration: That embarrassment? That’s something Zoë still struggles with.

Zoë: I carry a lot of shame about, like, my period and I don’t really know why or where it came from.

Narration: But with PJ’s help, she’s learning to change the way she thinks about her period.

Zoë: Like my partner always tells me, it’s a very normal thing to have your period.

Narration: If you’ve got questions about premenstrual syndrome, talk with a nurse practitioner or doctor. And if your PMS is unmanageable, a medical professional can help you find the right option for you to address it.

Feeling My Flo is a resource to help you start important conversations at critical moments, like when you’re deciding what kind of menstrual product is right for you. We’re here to

inform, entertain, and empower. Visit us at feelingmyflo.com and follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to join the conversation.

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