



BONUS EPISODE

Me, Mom, and Our Friend

Kamilah and her mom, Sherene, remember the first few years of their periods — the good, the bad and the ugly — and share lessons they've learned about menstruation. (And we record epic levels of mother-daughter sass.)

Narration: Welcome to a special bonus episode of Feeling My Flo...a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm your host, Kamilah Kashanie. My pronouns are she and her.

On Feeling My Flo, we talk a lot about what menstruation is like for all kinds of people. And I started thinking about what menstruation has been like for me. So our producers and I thought it would be a good idea to have someone very special to me on the show.

Kamilah Kashanie: Okay, so can you start by just introducing yourself and your age and, like, your relationship to me and why we're here?

Sherene Bridgewater: So my name is Sherene Bridgewater and I am Kamilah's mom. I'm 56 years old and I'm here to do a podcast on menstruation.

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: I'm so excited.

Kamilah: [Laughs.] Thank you.

Narration: So can I just say...it's a really big deal for my mom to be on the podcast. The women in my family come from a long line of very *discreet* Southern women. Periods aren't something they talk about publicly.

My mom uses she/her pronouns, and she was there for me when I got my period, especially when it got kind of rough. But we'll get to that a little later.

So I was ten years old when I started my period. But it wasn't until I was around twelve or thirteen that my period started to really affect my life. The thing is, I get very bad cramps. Like knee-crippling, lying-on-the-bathroom-floor-in-tears bad. Sometimes, I get so dizzy that I can't even see straight. Part of learning how to handle my cramps involved a lot of leaning on my mom, because she had been there too.

Sherene: So I got my period really late. I was in the ninth grade. And I think Grandbaby was waiting for me to get my menstrual before she had the conversation.

Narration: Grandbaby is what my sisters and I call my maternal grandmother.

Sherene: But I would be in school and I would be around my friends who didn't know that I hadn't gotten my menstrual yet and they would be talking about their *friend* and you know, they'd say, 'Oh, I can't go 'cause my friend came to visit,' or 'Nah, I got my friend.' And I'm like, 'Who is this friend?'

Narration: You'll notice Mom says "menstrual." It's just an abbreviation for menstruation.

She told me that she would play along with her friends, so they didn't know that she hadn't gotten her period yet. She finally *did* get her period when she was 13.

Sherene: Yeah, I was home and my stomach was hurting me, cramping me a little bit. I thought maybe I ate something bad. And then, um, I remember going to the bathroom and I remember seeing spots...and that's when I had told my mom, 'I think I got my period.' And then she looked...how gross, she looked into my underwear, that's so gross.

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: She was like, 'Let me see.' And I was like, 'What?!' Um, and then she was like, 'Yep, that's it.' After I got my friend and it was so painful, I was like, 'Yo, I don't like this friend. This friend got to go.'

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Narration: My grandmother showed her how to use a pad and told her to make sure she kept herself *clean* when she had her period. And the way she said to do that was with something called a douche.

Sherene: It was like a red bag...

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: ...and then it had like a big long tube and then you put the warm

water with whatever deodorizers you want to put inside the water and then you squeeze the bottle and it went up you and then it kind of just washed you out.

Narration: Back when Mom was a teen, doctors would recommend that you use a douche to feel *fresh* during *certain times of the month*. There were even these commercials for them like this one.

Clips: *Why douche?*
Certain times of the month I feel I just have to.

Why douche?
My best friend told me it's a real fresh feeling. It is!

Narration: [Today, most doctors would recommend *not* douching. It actually messes with the natural balance in the vagina.](#) We also checked with a nurse practitioner who said a vagina is completely self-cleaning anyway. But people didn't know that then, so Mom was taught to douche.

Sherene: And I did that for a while, because I didn't know any better. You know, your mom shared these things with you, and you figure, you know, she's your mom. She's been living longer than you. She's right. Um, and then I started going to the GYN...and the GYN was telling me, 'Don't douche.'

Narration: By the way, GYN is short for gynecologist...a doctor who specializes in caring for the childbearing reproductive organs.

Sherene: I was like, 'Don't douche? I've been doing this for years.'

Kamilah: How many years between when you got your period and when you first went to the GYN and stopped douching?

Sherene: I was probably 18 when I went to the GYN.

Kamilah: So like four or five years, you were douching?

Sherene: Yeah, I was douching for that long...because...

Kamilah: [Laughs.] The way you say that word really gets me, Mom.

Sherene: Oh, is it douching or dushing or...what is it?

Kamilah: Douche.

Sherene: Well, you douche, but you're douching, right? Aren't you douching when you douche?

Kamilah: You're saying like *dush*. Douche.

Sherene: Are you douching? Anyway. Go ahead.

Narration: When Mom first started menstruating, she told me her cramps were pretty moderate. But the reason she went to the GYN in the first place was because as the months and the years went on, her cramps had worsened into excruciating pain.

Sherene: My first day I didn't go to school. My first day I couldn't even walk. So probably once a month I would not go to school the first day. And then you took your Midol back then. Midol was whacked. It didn't work. And Pamprin. That didn't work. And then...you took Tylenol extra strength, and then during the course of the day, it would subside. But not subside enough where you didn't feel it anymore.

Kamilah: Was it just like uterus pains? 'Cause you know, sometimes, like, my back hurts.

Sherene: Yeah, your lower back hurts. It was almost like the pain was...hitting into your kidneys...like, the porcelain floor was my best friend. It was so awesome.

Kamilah: Why?

Sherene: Because it was cold and it kind of, like, put your uterus in, like, a shock...I just bear, put my stomach to the porcelain floor and I would just lay there.

Kamilah: Would you eat?

Sherene: That pain overrided everything. It was like, I don't want to do nothing. I just want to lay here and wait until it subsides. So that's what I did.

Narration: Eventually, she went to the GYN to deal with the pain.

Sherene: And, um, he had a conversation with me. How old I was when I first get my men — my first menstrual. Do I experience pain? And I was like, 'Yeah, that's why I'm here.'

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: And I was like, 'Yeah' and I told him the pain...and he was like, 'Oh, you sound like you have dysmenorrhea.'

Narration: Dysmenorrhea. It's the medical term for pain during a period and it affects [more than half](#)

[of menstruators](#). Primary [dysmenorrhea](#) is cramping and pain during a period. Secondary dysmenorrhea is pain from any *other* disease or condition in the reproductive system that isn't a period.

My mom has primary dysmenorrhea. And when she finally got that diagnosis for her period pain, it changed everything for her.

Sherene: I had to get prescribed medication. But um, I felt much better, um, after the doctor had diagnosed me with that and he's like, 'No, you're normal. People go through that.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay.' Because I would speak to my friends and not all of them had pain during their menstrual. So for me to be the outcast was like, 'Oh, maybe something's wrong with me.' But it happened every month. So I knew that it was my norm.

Narration: Just like my grandma did, Mom waited until my sisters and I had questions before we had "the period talk."

Sherene: Well, I never really prepared on how I'd have the conversation with you.

Kamilah: Um...I remember getting back home and...and I was about to get in the shower and I checked my underwear and I was like, 'Ah, it's brown.' I called you and you were like, 'Oh, it's your period. Okay.'

Sherene: Right. Right.

Kamilah: And you were like, 'You'll be fine'...like, and you showed me how to wash out my underwear in the sink.

Sherene: Right. Very important.

Kamilah: Yeah, and you were like, 'Just get in the shower.' It's gonna happen.

Sherene: Cold water.

Kamilah: I got in the shower and when I got out, you showed me how to put the pad in my underwear.

Sherene: Okay.

Kamilah: ...and I went to school the next day.

Narration: Just like Mom's, my cramps were pretty mild the first few years of my period. But over time it just got worse and worse, until I was dreading it every month. By the time I got to high school, I had this crazy pain in my stomach, my back, my thighs. Like Mom, I was getting was so nauseous that I couldn't even eat anything.

Sherene: You actually had it worse than I did.

Kamilah: Do you remember when you realized that my cramps were as bad as yours was?

Sherene: Yeah I was like, 'She's just like me.'

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: 'She's going through just like I did.'

Kamilah: With a smile on your face? [Laughs.] How dare you?!

Sherene: [Laughs.] I had to go pick you up, I think, because you were vomiting and...and I was like, 'Yo, what is going on?' Like, I didn't vomit. I just had really bad cramps. And you threw up for, like, almost a whole day.

Kamilah: I went to the nurse to get pads and I knew that I had to poop really bad 'cause of my period.

Sherene: Yeah.

Kamilah: And I was like, I want to use the nurse's private bathroom...and I went to the bathroom and I was in there for a really long time and I was telling her, like, 'I need to go home.' But I was in such a state on the bathroom floor that she was like, 'We're not letting you go home by yourself. We have to call your mom.' And I was like, 'Do not call my mom. She's going to have to leave work, she's not gonna want to leave work.'

Sherene: I was like, 'She should have a knack on this already! She knows this is what's gonna happen.' I got to leave work to go pick her up. And now I've got to stay home and babysit. Yeah, I was like, 'I can't believe I got to go to Manhattan to get this girl.' Oh my goodness. Yeah, I did say that.

Kamilah: You didn't feel bad for me at all?

Sherene: Not really. No.

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: [Laughs.]

Narration: Even though she says she didn't feel bad, Mom started letting me stay home from school

every month, just like she used to. In fact, [a March 2019 study in the Journal of Women's Health](#) catalogued people's periods from all over the globe, and showed that one in five cis girls often miss school due to their periods and period-related pains. But everytime I stayed home, it wasn't easy explaining why.

Sherene: So yeah, you had to give them a visual of that whole thing so they can get a better understanding...

Kamilah: Right.

Sherene: ...of what you're going through.

Kamilah: You were sympathetic because you had really bad cramps. It was normal, like, in our house. But, like, every month I had to again justify that it was as bad as it was because people didn't believe me and nobody else went through it. I had a little bit of this shame of feeling, like, so different.

Sherene: Right. I mean, I get it because some people just didn't go through that and so they couldn't relate.

Narration: Mom and I are pretty close, but we don't normally talk about periods like this. But opening up wasn't that hard. And sharing my feelings opened the door for her to even give me advice.

Sherene: How are you now with it? I don't even know. Like, how is it now?

Kamilah: I track it very diligently. Now I get cramps a couple of days before so I know it's coming and I can start taking, like, Advil or something so I can kind of give myself a, a leg up over it.

Sherene: 'Cause the thing is this, when you know it's coming and you know that you're gonna have the pain and you know that you're going to have discomfort and you're going to be on the porcelain, you kind of build up an anxiety about it that makes it worse. When you just, if you know it's just gonna happen and you just relax and know it's just going to happen for a season, then you kind of be like, you get yourself prepared for, like, 'Okay, I'm going to be in pain for two days. Okay, I can deal with it.'

Narration: I'm an experienced menstruator, but I'd never turn down advice from my mom. And at the end of our talk, she took some time to reflect on the fact that she's going through menopause. Menopause is the time when a person stops menstruating. Most of the time, it happens naturally...around age 45. And now that Mom is past her menstruating days, she talks about periods from a completely different perspective.

Sherene: For me, period was a journey. And so if you're getting a

menstrual, it's either going to be a long journey or a short journey, but it's the season. And they come and they go. It's what you do in that season and how you react that'll make it better. So...I'm in the over season now. I don't get my menstrual anymore. I don't have a relationship with my uterus. [Laughs.]

Kamilah: [Laughs.]

Sherene: I just don't. My uterus served its purpose.

Kamilah: If, if God willing, you're still around when I have kids, will you talk to my kids about your period or about periods?

Sherene: No...that's your job.

Kamilah: Oh, okay. [Laughs.]

Narration: If your period pain is unbearable, consider talking to a doctor or medical professional.

Feeling My Flo is a resource to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like you're lying on the floor and don't know what to do about your really bad cramps. 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.

Thanks for listening. Shout to our advisory board for weighing in on this episode. Feeling My Flo is executive produced by the incredible Mia Warren. This episode was produced by me. Our amazing sound engineer is Carolina Rodriguez. Our fantastic associate producer is Harsha Nahata. Our fabulous assistant producer is Emma Forbes. We're a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. I'm your host, Kamilah Kashanie.



CITATION

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