



A Catch-All Solution to a Menstrual Problem

When Jane Hartman Adamé started to have trouble with her menstrual cup, she didn't want to go back to tampons and pads. So she recruited a friend and together, they designed a new cup, which is used by scores of menstruators today.

Jane Hartman Adamé:

When Andy and I first started working on this project, he said to me, 'How do we make this product work for you?' And I realized that nobody had ever asked that to me about any product.

Narration:

That's Jane Hartman Adamé. She uses she/her pronouns. And this is Feeling My Flo, a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie...my pronouns are she and her.

Jane is 30 years old. She lives in the Bay Area in California with her husband, many dogs, cats, and even chickens in her backyard. For a long time, she was a hairdresser.

Jane: Hairdressing is the most fun job in the world. You know, everyone needs a haircut, so you get to work with so many different kinds of people and have lovely conversations all day. And I specialized in creative cuts and rainbow colors, so I got to just paint rainbows every day and it was really, really delightful.

Narration:

One of her clients was Andy Miller. Andy uses he/him pronouns, and he's a product designer. That means he turns ideas into things you'd buy in a store.

Andy Miller:

I've spent a number of conversations talking through ideas with Jane. And I knew that she had this amazing energy and creative impulse and can come up with these amazing ideas.

Jane: And we would sort of chit chat about, you know, wouldn't it be cool to

invent this or that? Just, just wild out-there ideas. He turned to me one time and said, you know, 'If you ever think of a little plastic thing that you want to make, just let me know.'

Narration: One day, Jane decided to take Andy up on that offer. She wanted to create a product to make her menstruation easier.

Jane uses something called a menstrual cup for her period.

Menstrual cups are reusable, so using them costs less than using pads or tampons. They're also more sustainable than disposable products that end up in landfills. And the cup saves time! It only needs to be emptied once or twice a day.

A *standard* menstrual cup is made out of medical-grade silicone...which is like a flexible, sturdy plastic...it has a bell shape. At the bottom, there's a short stem that's about the length of a fingernail. To use it, the cup is folded up and inserted into the vagina with the opening facing in. Once it's in, the cup opens up and forms a seal within the walls of the vagina to catch menstrual fluid.

Jane was having trouble using her cup. Sometimes she would talk to her salon clients about it.

Jane: It honestly made me feel a lot better for people to say, like, 'Girl, those things are hard to use.' And I realized...that it wasn't just a me thing. It was...they're kind of tricky to use for a lot of people, or a lot of people are too scared to give cups to try...a light bulb went off when I kept hearing this over and over again. Like, wow, this is just another one of those experiences that we're just expected to have and, and go through in order to have something that works better. It's like doesn't seem like we should have to do that.

Narration: Removing a menstrual cup *can* be tricky. To take one out, the user needs to break the seal to release the suction. Typically, the user inserts a finger into their vagina and presses *into* the cup. Then the menstrual fluid collected in the cup is emptied out...paper towels should definitely be handy.

By the way, the menstrual cup has been around for 100 years. But it's only now becoming more mainstream. [One of the leading brands of cups...the Diva Cup...has grown in usage by 639 percent in just five years. In a study from a Canadian medical journal, 91 percent of menstruators](#) who tried a cup said they'd recommend them to a friend.

After a couple of times, using a menstrual cup can get easier. But it didn't get easier for Jane, because all sorts of regular everyday activities were causing her pain.

Jane: So I was diagnosed with hyper mobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and that's a connective tissue disorder that means that all of the collagen in my body is made a little bit wrong. It's like my DNA has the wrong recipe. And so everywhere my bones come together, there is excess movement. And

what that does for me is it pinches nerves. It causes my muscles to go into spasm to try to hold everything together.

Narration: When Jane tried to remove the cup by pulling the small stem, she would accidentally overextend her joints.

Jane: I've hurt myself doing much less, honestly. There were plenty of times where my fingers would move out of place or my wrist...I, I remember there was this one time I went to remove my cup and I, I just couldn't get it out, but I just, my, my lower back, so my SI joints, tend to move...and one of those just popped out of position. I had my back in spasm for two weeks.

Narration: She realized her days as a hairdresser were coming to an end.

Jane: Hairdressing was so, so painful for me. It just seemed like I could feel that I extended myself beyond what was okay for myself. Um, it basically got to the point where I, I could do hair for a day, but I would need an entire day to recover.

Narration: So Jane was in the middle of a big life change...and in an attempt to find more comfort, she set her cup aside.

Jane: When I actually had to sort of give up on my cup and put it away in a drawer and close that drawer seemingly forever, it was like, it was losing access to this thing that was really, really helpful to me. I had already experienced all of the benefits of it and the years I was using it before it stopped working for me. And I wanted those benefits. That just seemed not fair. And so rather than being like, 'Oh, well that option didn't work for me.' I'm just not the kind of person who likes to...give up. That was the big catalyst.

Narration: After Jane tucked her cup in a drawer, she thought back to those conversations at the hair salon about periods and how difficult it can be to use menstrual cups. She knew *there had to be a better way*, and she thought of one former client in particular.

Jane: And really his voice just popped into my head when I was wrestling with my cup, one of those last times. And I remem...I was, I do want to make a little plastic thing. I want to make this thing work for me. Um, so it's, it's probably funny to think of one of your cis male friends while you're fishing for your menstrual cup, but I knew that if, if anyone could help me figure it out, it would be Andy.

Andy: My reaction was, I, I'm not squeamish about this. And, um...I was really excited because it was Jane and then I was really excited because it was menstrual cups.

So I actually, um...got excited about menstrual cups when I first saw them inside a grocery store 10 years ago. And I thought to myself, 'This is a really simple and elegant device.' And I really respected it.

Narration: So with Jane as the expert in her body and Andy as an expert in design, they started toying with different ideas to make a more user-friendly menstrual cup.

Jane: So for the first six months that we were working on this project together, we, uh, we were meeting up several times a week, sometimes at a coffee shop, sometimes at my house...especially at my house if I was having a really rough recovery day from doing hair the day before. And so on those recovery days, I'd be in my pajamas and Andy would come over and we would start sketching, making, you know, prototypes.

Narration: Andy and Jane 3-D printed molds of the cups. Then they injected silicone into the mold, and this next part sounds like it'd be super fun.

Jane: Then what you get to do is after it sets in the 3-D printed mold, you wrap it in a towel and you smash it with a hammer, like a geode.

Narration: During this process, Andy went camping in the woods one weekend, and inspiration struck. When he got back, he showed up at Jane's door...holding a menstrual cup.

But he had sewn a string into the lip of the cup. The string went inside and through the bottom. And he tied a button at the end of the string.

Andy: I pulled on the string and it, it bent the cup. And it, you know...it was clear that it was going to break the seal. And Jane understood it right away. And we knew right then in that moment, holding that prototype, that this is it. This is the solution.

Narration: Then they started a Kickstarter campaign and posted about their new cup on Facebook. Within a week, Jane had more than 50 people from all over the world emailing her, wanting to try it.

Jane: I wanted to make sure that the product that we were developing wasn't just Jane's Perfect Cup. I wanted to make sure it was something that was going to serve needs for a lot of people. And through the course of doing this project, so many people reached out to me with their ideas and their feedback and their needs.

Narration: About a thousand people were giving them feedback on the design.

Jane: There was someone following our project named Molly who reached out to me and she said, 'I have the same condition as you, Jane, and I want to be able to use this, but I don't have enough grip strength to be able to grab that little thing. Is there a way that you could make a loop?'

Narration: And so they did. With all of these changes, the final cup works something like this...

Andy: And then when you're ready to remove it, instead of reaching in and pinching, what you can do is put your finger through the loop at the bottom and pull. And it pulls the string or pulls the tab and it bends the upper rim. And that bending of the upper rim releases the seal and the whole cup can come out.

Jane: And so it's the same motion as taking out a tampon. And I, I wanted to make it as familiar as possible.

Narration: Jane and Andy's cup caught the attention of *another* creator of nontraditional menstrual products, the Flex Company. The cup they created is now called *the Flex Cup*.

Jane isn't doing hair anymore. She works full-time at the Flex Company and talks to people about how to make menstruation easier.

Jane: I always say that my current job right now is like hairdressing without the hair. And that's because my job in, in both settings has always been to make the other person feel really, really comfortable. Because obviously that's important when you're having a haircut, somebody is touching you and you know, doing something very, um, intimate and specific for you. And similarly, when I'm talking to people on the phone, we're not just talking about the weather, we're talking about their body.

I am proudest of putting a product out into the world that makes people's periods suck less. And I'm also really proud of myself personally just for, um, it's, it's been a really hard couple of years. You know, I look back at it and I'm like, that's the most I've struggled in my entire life. And throughout that period of time where things were so hard for me, I still managed to do something awesome.

Narration: Andy's *also* enjoying their work together. He's at the Flex Company too.

Andy: My worldview has expanded. I just feel like I'm a much better person knowing more about menstruation and I get to know more because of my job. And that's really exciting. I feel like it's an aspect of, of people's lives that isn't talked about. And, and now I, I feel perfectly comfortable getting to talk about it at work.

Narration: Feeling My Flo is a resource to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you're deciding if a menstrual cup could be right for you.

To learn more about the Flex Cup, you can head to flexcup.com. If you want the chance to talk to Jane about your period or experience with a menstrual cup...maybe you have a tip or two...head to uterati.com. That's uterati.com.

Also if you're curious to learn more about menstrual cups, and you're just not sure where to start, a great resource is putacupinit.com.

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