



## When Your Period Stops

When she was 19, Annie lost her period. She tells us what that was like — and we also talk to a doctor about why that sometimes happens.

*Note: this episode discusses eating disorders, so you might want to listen with an adult.*

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**Narration:** Welcome to 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.

Before we get started, I want to give you a heads up. On this episode, we're talking in-depth about eating disorders, and specifically, anorexia nervosa. We think this is an important topic to discuss, but if it's going to be hard for you to hear, we recommend listening with a caring adult or skipping the episode altogether.

**Annie:** I grew up in the New York City suburbs on Long Island.

**Narration:** That's Annie. She's 29 and uses she/her pronouns.

**Annie:** I was a theater nerd growing up...kind of a really loud, hyper kid. [Laughs.] I, um, was a fairly late bloomer.

**Narration:** The average age for getting a first period is 12. Annie got hers at 14.

**Annie:** I knew the whole drill because I had an older sister, so it didn't feel monumental at all to me. It just kinda felt like, 'Oh, thank God I'm alive. That's good.'

**Narration:** When Annie sat down with our producer Mia this summer, she was really excited. She had just moved in with her partner of ten years. They had been dating long-distance since college, so they were super excited to live together—that is, until one afternoon, when she got a text from him.

**Annie:** It's, like, in the middle of the afternoon—the dreaded New York City text message, which is “We have bed bugs.” So I come home from work and you know, I'm a mess. I had never had them before. I didn't fully know what I was doing.

**Narration:** After calling the exterminator, Annie killed some time at a nearby café.

**Annie:** I get back to my apartment at like 11:30. I go to sit down, I go to the bathroom, I wipe and I see something brown on the toilet paper.

**Narration:** Annie had gotten her period. No big deal, right? Except for Annie, it was. And that's because she hadn't gotten her period in *ten* years.

The medical term for “loss of a menstrual period”—typically for three months or more—is *amenorrhea*. To learn more about it, our producer Mia called Dr. Ovidio Bermudez, who uses he/him pronouns. He's not Annie's doctor; he's chief clinical officer at the Eating Recovery Center in Denver, Colorado.

**Dr. Ovidio Bermudez:** There are two kinds of amenorrhea: primary amenorrhea, which means you've never had a menses, but something derails the system, and then your menses is delayed and delayed and delayed, so let's just assume...

**Narration:** What Annie was experiencing was diagnosed by her own doctor. It's called *secondary* amenorrhea. That means she already had a period as a teenager, but then her menstruation was interrupted.

**Annie:** I became anorexic in college. I was probably officially diagnosed the spring semester of my sophomore year. But the symptoms definitely started before then, earlier that year. And it escalated very quickly.

**Narration:** Before we get into why Annie lost her period, we need to back up a little and talk about what Annie's life was like at the time she was diagnosed with anorexia.

Flashback to freshman year of college when Annie was going through a lot of changes.

**Annie:** As happens to a lot of folks when they get to college, the experience of having ... unlimited food all around me was more than I could handle. I didn't know how to, sort of, have all those opportunities to eat and still continue eating in a way that was normal. So I used it when, you know, when I was bored or uncomfortable or nervous...or anything.

**Narration:** Annie gained weight in her first semester. By the way, this is a *really normal* thing that happens to a lot of people when they go through the big life change of going to college. It even has a name: the “freshman fifteen.”

When you're a college student, you have total freedom to choose whatever you want to eat. Your parents or guardians aren't around to regulate your food intake, so many students tend to gain or lose a few pounds.

There's nothing *bad* about gaining or losing the freshman fifteen. But after Annie gained weight, her relationship with eating started to get unhealthy.

**Annie:** Whatever I was going through at that point, whatever it was, I treated it by going back hard in the other direction with food. So just excessively controlling what I was eating and, um, I started to lose some weight.

**Narration:** Annie lost a lot of weight in a very short amount of time. And when people around her noticed what was going on, she got help.

**Annie:** It was sort of funny. I thought that I was walking in and they were going to do an evaluation and decide, like, do I need day treatment, outpatient treatment, whatever. And they literally after like ten minutes were like, 'No, you're coming in, you're ... going to go to the hospital.'

And at that point my brain wasn't functioning in a way that made any sense anyway. So, everything was really blurry. A lot of my memories from this time in my life are complete black holes, because I just wasn't ... everything I was doing was functioning just on like, you know, the lowest possible amount of resources.

**Narration:** It's important to know that anorexia nervosa is a medical condition.

**Dr. Bermudez:** They're not fads. They're not a personal belief system. They are a serious mental illness ... no different than serious depression or serious anxiety or schizophrenia, for that matter. In the sense that these are not illnesses that people choose, these are not illnesses that people can sort of...elect to be in or out of.

**Narration:** The truth is, no one is happy with how their bodies look 100% of the time. That's normal. But struggling with your body image doesn't mean you have anorexia. An eating disorder is a mental illness that requires a medical diagnosis.

People with anorexia display a lot of symptoms. Sometimes they skip meals or prefer not to eat in public. Often, they constantly obsess about the way their bodies look, because, again, anorexia is a mental illness. And every person with an eating disorder has a different journey.

After a month in treatment, Annie went back to school. But her struggles with anorexia weren't over.

**Annie:** If you're not giving your body enough resources, it shuts down anything that isn't essential. And to keep me alive, the ability to have a child was not essential. So my body gave it up.

**Narration:** Annie was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at age 19. And as a result, she stopped getting her period.

**Dr. Bermudez:** The hormones that the brain makes to tell the ovary and the body to actually menstruate and become ready for the possibility of a pregnancy get shut down. So it's the brain that makes a decision to say we don't want this to happen.

**Narration:** By the way, Dr. Bermudez said that not *all* people who have anorexia experience amenorrhea. But it does happen in many cases. Including Annie's.

**Annie:** I think after a couple of months, I just kind of realized I wasn't getting it or it slowly faded, like it was spotting and then it was just nothing. I just was living my life as a person who doesn't menstruate. And that was my normal.

**Narration:** Annie felt really confused when she stopped menstruating. Looking back now, she can trace when she realized the complexity of the mental illness that she was experiencing.

**Annie:** The rational half of my brain recognized that it was a big problem. The disordered half of my brain thought I was special.

And there are parts of getting a period that kind of suck. So there are parts of not having one that ... make life a little bit easier. And that's just a really messed up thing to say. And I fully recognize that. But I almost think that when your brain is sick, you're not thinking that way.

**Narration:** Since Annie was diagnosed with anorexia at 19, she's come a long way.

**Annie:** I'm infinitely better than I was, but I'm still at risk. And I know that I still have a brain that thinks about food and thinks about what I eat way more than I would like to.

**Narration:** As she approaches her thirties, she says feeling fully healthy is a lifelong process. Dr. Bermudez says that's different for every person.

**Dr. Bermudez:** The vast majority, 90% or so of eating disorders ... can be successfully treated, and people can successfully find recovery. But that journey is different for different people. For some folks, that journey is, you know, one, two, three years of treatment and it's behind you and you're done. Life goes on. For some, it's, you know, eight, nine, 10 years of treatment and it'd still be behind you.

**Annie:** I would love to be able to devote that brain space to something else, because it's exhausting and it has nothing to do with who I want to be as a person or the things that I strive for, or who I want to be as a friend or a daughter or a sister or a partner. It just, it's a distraction ... it's ... but ... it's, that's the sickness, right? Like, it's there.

**Narration:** So back to this summer. Annie gets her period...for the first time in a decade...and she's shocked.

**Annie:** I went to work. I was like, 'Mhhh, it's just spotting. It'll be fine.' By like two o'clock, I'm freaking out and running out to get tampons because it was, like, not fine. And I had to read the instructions because I forgot how to use a tampon. And the first one that I did, I had to throw out because I didn't do it right.

**Narration:** She said getting used to her period felt like being 14 again. Except her flow was different...

**Annie:** The bleeding lasted for a full week, which is something that never happened to me before in my life. It was heavy for two days and light for several after that. And that was really new for me. I was always a three-day period person.

But I was also just really feeling excited and crazy about the period thing. And I will tell you...I was ravenous in a way that I had not felt in years. You would guess that that might be scary for me, but it was actually really nice. I woke up and I was like, 'Where's the chocolate?' And I distinctly remember when I was in high school, my cravings were chocolate and greasy food like fries and stuff, and I...I totally felt that way again. And it was like, 'Holy crap.' Like, this is me. Like, this is the food that I like to eat and I feel good wanting it. Like, I felt really good, you know?

**Narration:** For the first time in a long time, not to be corny, but...she's *really* feeling her flow.

**Annie:** I love it. She's great. She's a lady. I haven't named her, but she's great. Um, I just want her to come visit me again. She's like, uh, she's like the cool girl, but I just want to like, I just want her to like me. [Laughs.]

**Narration:** And she's hopeful about what comes next.

**Annie:** I don't know what form she'll take, but she's welcome in any form.

**Narration:** If you or someone you love are showing symptoms of what could be an eating disorder, tell a parent or trusted adult. You can call the National Eating Disorders Association

Hotline

at 1-800-931-2237. And we've listed additional resources on our website.

Feeling My Flo is a resource to help you start important conversations at critical moments... like when you're starting the heaviest day of your period.

We're a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. And we're here to inform, entertain, and empower. Visit us at [feelingmyflo.com](http://feelingmyflo.com) and follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#) to join the conversation. You can also tell us what you thought of this episode by emailing [hello@feelingmyflo.com](mailto:hello@feelingmyflo.com).

This episode was produced by Mia Warren; she's our executive producer. It was mixed by Cedric Wilson. Our assistant producer is Emma Forbes. Our sound engineer is Carolina Rodriguez. I'm your host, Kamilah Kashanie.



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