

LEARNING TO RIDE THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE:

A guide for menstrual wellness

How can we be worthy guides for our daughters as they prepare for and begin their menstrual journey? There are very few Western women who don't think their experience of menarche could have been better. Often way, way better. Menstruation has a long collective legacy as a curse, nevertheless through our own processes, insights and willingness to share, we can offer a positive and healthy menarche experience and menstrual journey to our daughters.

Women have a wealth of experience of menstruation, fertility and the menstrual cycle, as well as sexuality and relationships. As mothers, this complex soup of our own experience can be nourishing food for our daughters, and although these experiences may not have all been positive, we can offer them to our daughters in a wholesome and enriching way, the robust energy of the grist.

To be good role models we all need to care for ourselves compassionately and wisely, particularly if we have menstrual distress. Make sure we give ourselves quiet time and space during menstruation and allow the natural indrawing spirit of this time to guide us. You'll know more of yourself through your own unfolding ever-changing menstrual cycle. Make friends with menstruation. Dance *with* your menstrual cycles, become aware of your rhythms, cycles and needs as an intrinsic part of your spiritual journey and soul life.

Find time to garden (assuming you love gardening). Walk in a beautiful park or the bush. Write. Paint. Sew. Sleep and dream. Meditate. Make time to ask yourself 'What do I feel like doing now?', and do just that. You may only have an hour, but an hour of exactly

what you feel like is magic, a balm to the soul; utterly refreshing and relaxing. More than an hour can be very nice too. You may find an hour hard won this month, turns magically into two hours next month.

Do you have menstrual rituals? By giving yourself time and creating meaningful and nourishing rituals, however simple, you not only give yourself a precious gift, but in your modeling give your daughter a precious gift as well. Ritual may just be habit, and many rituals happen unconsciously. They can become meaningful and powerful by our being conscious and having conscious intention. Interestingly, the root word for 'ritual' comes from a Sanskrit word that means 'menses', linking menstruation with the very origin of religious ritual.

Some favourite menstrual rituals

- Wear something red on your first day of bleeding
- Buy, or pick, yourself a bunch of flowers, including red ones if you can
- Put your favorite table cloth on the table.
- Light a red candle
- Write in a menstrual journal – your thoughts, feelings, experiences, dreams leading up to menstruation and now that you are menstruating – it's interesting to see patterns emerge and the insight, ideas and creativity that you have at this time.
- Learn about therapies you can practice at home for menstrual balance and general well-being, such as aromatherapy, yoga, shiatsu self-massage, herbs, the deer exercise, belly dancing. This can become a special part of your menstrual ritual and self-care.

- Take time out. Time for yourself. Unpressured time, time for what you feel like and not from your 'To Do' list, nothing deliberately 'purposeful'. Time to dream, and float and be leisurely (even an hour or two 'off' is magic.)
- Meditate, create, sew, knit, do craftwork, write, garden, swim, sing. Change pace. Be inward, intuitive. At work, work at your own pace, use the creative and intuitive powers abundantly available at this time. Don't, at this time, work more than necessary. Don't rush if you can help it. This is the time for labour saving devices and cutting unnecessary corners.
- Do an emotional review and clean out. Give yourself time to process what has been going on in your life, look at where you're going and what is and is not working for you. Make plans and promise to look after yourself.

GUIDING OUR DAUGHTERS

As we guide our daughter on their journey towards menarche and the menstrual cycle, it's important to be open, creative and honest. Above all, we need to foster an environment where it's easy to communicate about menstruation. If we're uncomfortable, we need to be honest with ourselves about it. If we don't know something, we need to make time to find out.

Being open about menstruation from the beginning will encourage curiosity – and your daughter will ask questions as they naturally arise and you can answer them in an age appropriate way as you go along. Nevertheless, some girls are more likely to be aware and want to know than others – don't assume that an answer you gave your daughter

when she was three or seven will be remembered now. As she approaches menstruation it's important to think through the things she needs to know and address the particular concerns that she may have. Some girls sport a convincing air of knowing-it-all, and may think that they do. They don't.

Some girls will come to you with all their questions. With other girls you'll need to go to them. Either way, you need to consciously prepare, being aware that as you've been menstruating so long you can forget how much you know and how familiar and comfortable you've become with the whole process.

Have a chat about the body changes that are or will be happening. This sort of chat is likely to be ongoing as new things happen to her body, as she thinks of questions and as she hears the weird and wonderful stories from her friends from school. Be prepared for questions to pop up at odd moments.

Talk about what happens at menarche. Almost always the first period is very light. Remember though that for some girls, their first blood *can* come in a rush. If this happened to you, there may be a genetic factor and it's a good idea to tell your daughter. Make sure you let your daughter know that menstruation usually lasts between three and seven days.

Talk together about any relevant sex education or menstrual cycle and menstruation lessons at school. What are her friends at school saying? What is the schoolyard culture regarding menstruation? What are the current names for menstruation? Tell her about the names that were around when you were at school. A euphemism I've heard recently for a girl asking another if a third has had her period yet, 'Is she a woman yet?'

Encourage your daughter to know her own body. Let her know it's OK to check out her genitals in a mirror. After all, boys get to see theirs every time they have a wee and many women go through their entire life without actually seeing their external genitalia.

Go to your local library and take out a range of books on puberty and sexual development written for adolescents. Although they may be variable in the quality of their information and presentation they can be good to look at together, as a focus for discussion. Resist the temptation to give your daughter books and then consider the job done. Now, more than ever, she needs your flesh and blood input, experience, adulthood and normality!

Talk about your own periods and menstrual cycles. Share as many stories as you know about the menarche experiences of the women in your family or your women friends. Better still, have them share their own story. The more varied experiences your daughter hears about the more likely she will be to feel OK and 'normal' about her own.

If you've had a particularly difficult time with your periods you may want to tone it down for your daughter. You can talk about what has helped you (if you haven't sought appropriate help, do so now for your own sake, as well as your daughter's). Many girls have considerable fear about period pain from stories they've heard. Make sure you understand the kinds of therapies available and can reassure your daughter that if she has pain it can be treated and she won't have to just put up with it.

Buy a range of menstrual pads that will be suitable for your daughter when she begins to bleed. You may arrange these in a special box or basket and give it to her to keep for her special time. You may like to add some things to the box, like some new feminine

underwear, a nice aromatherapy oil, some pot pouri, a diary, a book, whatever seems to suit the occasion to you. The main thing is the pads. Make sure she feels welcome to open the packets, to try some out, alone or with her friends, and to generally familiarize herself. The giving of the box could be a special time and perhaps a time when you can look at the pads together and talk. Most likely she got to play with pads or tampons at an earlier time in her life. They will be taking on new meaning now.

While mothers may have the central parental role in preparing their daughters for menstruation, for obvious reasons, it's important for fathers to stay connected to their daughters at this time. As their bodies and minds are changing rapidly, good old dad, or a close male friend as a father figure, can provide solid safe masculine support, reflecting back to them that they are OK as they metamorphose into young women.

Make sure the boys in your household are also clued up about menstruation, if they aren't already. Don't assume boys don't need to know about menstruation. They would prefer to have correct information -- this will help their understanding of and relationships with girls and women *all their lives*.

Most girls who know about menstruation will be checking for blood for months before their first period arrives. As your daughter approaches her first menstruation it's a good idea for her to take some pads with her in her school bag, overnight bag or on school camps.

Don't forget you can start educating your daughters about menstruation from an early age through fairy stories. By telling these stories you're preparing your daughter for the momentous threshold she's approaching. Much has been written about the power of

language and metaphor in telling stories about life, and life stages. You may like to revisit some of these stories or make up your own, adding metaphor and image. Gateways and doorways, transformation and metamorphosis, waking up, gaining powers *and* responsibilities, flowers and fertile fields, butterflies, newfound abilities to create, white-red-black colourations, are common metaphors for menstruation.

When your daughter is still young enough to be playing with dolls, consider making some cloth menstrual pads to fit into her favourite doll's undies (you may need to make the undies too). I would suggest avoiding Barbie and similar dolls for this exercise as they are anatomically too impossibly thin to represent a menstruating woman!

When your daughter's first period arrives, celebrate! Roll out the red carpet! Welcome the new menstruant! This can be simple – many girls will feel private about their first period so it's important to be appropriate.

Girls usually become more blasé as they get used to the whole process of menstruation, others are happy to be right out there from the beginning. Allow your daughter to pace the news-telling. She may be happy to tell family members, or she may rather you do the telling as she focuses on getting used to her new status. Most girls, these days, enjoy sharing the news with their friends, discussing their experiences and giving each other advice, even organising celebrations for each other.

Ways to celebrate your daughter's menarche

- Bake her favorite cake
- Cook her favorite meal for dinner

- Allow her to have a day at home from school with you. If you are due at work take the day off to be with her, if you can. Do some things together that you both enjoy. Browse in a bookshop. Shop. Pick flowers. Play music. Cook. Talk – about her dreams, her visions for her life, her values and ideals, her strengths (and yours.)
- Pick, or buy, her some flowers and arrange them in a vase for her room. (What about red roses? Or gerberas? Or tulips or cyclamen in a pot?)
- Choose something that you have that was your mother's, grandmother's or aunt's to give her as a matrilineal heirloom.
- Buy her a special necklace or earrings, a cut above the little girl jewelry she has had to date, budget permitting.
- Work out together where and how she can mark down Day One of her period so she can keep track of when her periods come and when the next one will be due (as she becomes regular). If she doesn't have a diary or suitable calendar to use, buy or make one.
- If she likes to write, buy her a special journal that she can write her dreams, thoughts and ideas in.
- Alert your female family members of your daughter's impending menarche – they may like to have a small symbolic present ready to give her.
- Plan a gathering of women and girls, or just women, who have a special relationship with your daughter, to celebrate with food, dance, music, swimming, camping, singing, fire, painting. Or plan a similar gathering within a year of your daughter's menarche with a group of mothers and similarly aged daughters, as a group celebration.
- A father/daughter dinner out can be a way of celebrating a girl growing up and this being acknowledged by the special man (currently!) in her life.
- In some cultures the dreams that a girl has around the time of her menarche are thought to be significant to her passage through this threshold and prophetic of her future. If telling-dreams is part of your family culture you may like to talk about this tradition or just share dreams at this time.
- Introduce your daughter to some nice, luxurious, indulgent feminine stuff (if you haven't already) – a long bath with a candle and beautiful aromatherapy oils, a manicure, a pedicure, a foot massage, an aromatherapy massage, a face mask (you know the kind of thing!)
- Give her an honest and heartfelt 'congratulations'.

Keep it simple. Be creative-intuitive-inspired.

Jane Bennett

