

MOJEB HEALTH



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As SHA Wellness Clinic opens a new Sexual Health Unit, and we become more in tune to the fact that good health is so much more than just the mental and physical, here's why open conversations around our sexual wellness should no longer be taboo

# the Bedroom Diaries



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“Cultural and religious taboo is the critical factor that stops people talking about their sexual wellness”

JOSLIN GRACIAS, PSYCHOLOGIST AT THRIVE WELLBEING CENTRE

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hy is it that, no matter what our age, starting a conversation around sex is still something that makes us want to die a little inside? Especially here in the UAE, where discussions around sexual wellness are still very much taboo, it's often thought the easiest solution is to pack up our concerns in a neat little box and hide them at the back of our wardrobes alongside last season's Prada coat we never did get around to wearing. According to recent research, however, our shyness could be doing us more harm than good, with our overall health and wellbeing actually dependent on our sexual health in more ways than one.

The WHO defines sexual wellbeing as 'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality', referring to people with good sexual health as those with a positive approach to their bodies, relationships and sexual experiences.

Addressing a number of issues like hormonal imbalances, dryness, pain during intercourse and low libido, as well as the likes of body image issues and low self-esteem which affect millions of people all over the world, the same organisation counts it among the key areas of wellness that dictate the entire health of our bodies, including our state of mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellness. "It's important to understand sexual wellness because it's a very important part of ourselves and our lives," agrees Joslin Gracias, CDA-licensed psychologist at Dubai's Thrive Wellbeing Centre. "Maslow describes air, food, water, shelter, sleep, clothing and sex as our biological needs, so why is it we are so comfortable talking about every other need apart from the latter?"

Cultural and societal norms are most certainly at play here, and can influence our attitudes and beliefs in a not-so-positive way. This in turn affects our understanding of what is considered 'normal' or 'healthy' when it comes to our sex lives. "In my opinion, and what I often see in my practice, the cultural and religious taboo is the critical factor that stops people talking about how they are feeling when it comes to sex," says Joslin. "Shame is another factor that causes disturbance too. But our physical, mental and sexual health are all linked, so if one of these suffers then it has a knock-on effect on the others. After all, our human body has sex hormones, so how can we see sexual wellness as abnormal?"

This is the premise behind the new Sexual Health Unit at SHA Wellness Clinic in Alicante, Spain, where doctors proactively ask all patients about their levels of satisfaction, sexual activity or inactivity, just as they would their blood pressure and cholesterol. Focusing on hormone and sexual optimisation, as well as emotional balance to help improve our quality of life, the unit addresses sexual health with a multidisciplinary approach to optimise the foundations on which desire, self-esteem and sexual function are built.

"Lately it feels like we are in the midst of a seismic shift around the conversation of sex, but when women want to ask questions that are deemed uncomfortable, impolite or beyond their control for whatever reason, they are still silenced in a myriad of ways," Cinthya Molina, psychologist at SHA Wellness Clinic and head of the new unit, tells *MOJEH*. "Which isn't to say that men have it easy in the realm of intimacy — our culture does not do a good job of allowing boys and men to embrace vulnerability — but it's been so interesting to see how conversations around women's sexual health can be triggering for so many people, and that's something that needs to change." 



The service kicks off with a preliminary consultation with Cinthya, from which an initial diagnosis will be made for referrals to the rest of the disciplines including gynaecology and urology to treat possible pathologies; regenerative medicine for stem-cell therapies; or aesthetic gynaecology to improve appearances and boost collagen production with cutting-edge technology and devices with non-invasive radiofrequency and fractionated lasers. "Sexual wellness is a manifestation of our general state of health," adds SHA's Dr Rafael Navas, an expert in Integrative and Hormonal Health. "Everything is interconnected: cardiovascular health, the presence of chronic low-grade inflammation and orthomolecular and metabolic balance. That's why we work to optimise overall health, and thus, sexual function."

While female hormones are usually the first in line to take the fall for those sudden, unexplained mood swings, they are also a vital factor in our sexual wellness, so if yours are feeling all out of whack, it would be wise to pay attention. After all, this intricate network of chemical messengers is what ensures our bodies function like well-oiled machines, so why would they not play a part? "Hormones are often overlooked when it comes to many physical, mental and sexual conditions, yet they play a significant role," explains Cinthya. "Oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone, whether at their highest or lowest levels, all contribute to our sex lives, so that's why we need to evaluate the hormonal levels of our guests to determine if the symptoms they are experiencing are due to a hormonal imbalance. In certain cases, hormone replacement therapy may be necessary and justified to alleviate symptoms, but we also recommend maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in regular exercise and practising good mental health to achieve the optimal balance." If you're not planning on travelling to SHA in the near future, most of the UAE's leading clinics offer hormone mapping including Zia Medical Centre on Jumeirah Beach Road and Euromed Clinic and Fakeeh University Hospital, with prices starting at around Dhs1,000.

There is, of course, no concept of 'normality' when discussing sex — we are all unique individuals with different needs, and what may be considered abnormal for one person could be completely normal for another. "It's key that we understand there are no averages or standards when it comes to human sexuality," explains Cinthya. "Yet good health isn't just the absence of disease, and when we experience improved sexual wellness, it undoubtedly has a positive impact on both our physical and emotional wellbeing."

And the benefits are endless. When we are on top of our sexual health, it can help foster a better experience with our body, allowing us to accept ourselves more deeply, but we can also expect to see increased energy levels, alleviation of menopause-related symptoms and sleep problems, as well as an improvement in our cardiovascular health, muscle strength and blood pressure. Intimacy can also boost a person's mood and sense of wellbeing by fostering closeness and connection, leading to enhanced and happier relationships. "All these factors contribute to a highly positive impact on our emotional wellbeing," she adds.

Even in today's age, sexual wellness is something often only considered a concern until the age of 50 or 60, yet as lifespans lengthen, women give birth later in life, or people divorce and remarry, concerns and discussions should no longer be given an age limit. "As life expectancy increases, so do sexual expectations," says Cinthya. "If you can reach the age of 80 with a high quality of life, it makes no



Photographed by Susan Bluth for MOJEH '24

sense to stop sexual activity at the age of 60. Why resign yourself to living 20 years without sex?" As such, it's crucial to treat ourselves with care and respect when addressing these matters, having open conversations, even when the topic itself can feel excruciatingly painful to talk about, with the goal of normalising and opening up honest conversations around sex.

"Things are definitely getting better in the Middle East, but discussing sexual health is still seen as a taboo by some people," concludes Joslin. "The media in general is helping people be more open to talking about sex, but the downside is that this information can be one-sided. Instead, we need a more balanced approach. We need correct and research-based information to help understand our own sexual selves and learn to be confident about seeking help where necessary. Trust me, both your body and your mind will thank you for it." <sup>(1)</sup>



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