Exploring the Quality of Intimate and Sexual Relationships of Patients with Endometriosis: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Endometriosis is a chronic gynecological condition associated with significant physical pain and psychosocial burden. Although its medical impact has been widely documented, limited research has explored its influence on intimate and sexual relationships within culturally specific contexts such as Puerto Rico. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of intimate and sexual relationships among Puerto Rican women diagnosed with endometriosis. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 Puerto Rican women diagnosed with endometriosis. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach. Percentages reported reflect the proportion of coded references within themes, rather than participant frequency, in order to capture the relative prominence of patterns of meaning across narratives. Findings revealed complex relational and embodied experiences shaped by pain and emotional distress. Dyspareunia was predominantly described as high intensity (88% of references), significantly affecting sexual engagement. Within couple dynamics, negative experiences were prominent (62%), alongside challenges in empathy, with 48% of references reflecting perceived lack of partner understanding. Communication barriers were further evidenced by unmet educational needs (54%), highlighting gaps in partner awareness and support. Participants also reported significant impacts on self-concept, with 83% of references reflecting negative self-esteem experiences linked to bodily changes and pain. Additionally, fertility-related concerns were largely negative (72%), reflecting uncertainty, loss, and distress surrounding reproductive identity. Across narratives, participants described an ongoing tension between the desire for intimacy and the anticipation of pain. Findings underscore the importance of addressing relational, emotional, and sexual dimensions of endometriosis through culturally sensitive, integrative, and couple-informed psychological interventions.