

More Ways To

Love your



VULVA

## Ways to Connect with and Care for Your Vulva

This section explores different emotional, mental, and physical ways to further connect with your vulva and your sexual/reproductive health.

### Look at Your Vulva!

This may feel very uncomfortable at first, but the more you do it, the easier it gets! It's *just* a part of your body, like fingers or ears.

1. Grab a mirror and find a quiet, private place.
2. Use the mirror to look at your vulva. Try doing this mindfully- with curiosity, an open mind, and no judgment. Notice what thoughts, emotions, or sensations arise.
3. Have a journal or notepad handy to write down your experience during this exercise.

Emily Nagoski, author of *Come As You Are*, suggests doing this weekly. Nagoski also recommends noticing something you like about your vulva each time and writing that down, as well as seeing how your list grows as you foster more appreciation for your body.\*

\*Source: Nagoski, E. (2015). *Come as you are*. Simon & Schuster.

## Vulvar Self-Examination (VSE)

Looking at your vulva is essential not only for promoting body positivity but also for your health. Performing a Vulvar Self-Examination (VSE)\* allows for early detection of abnormalities that may indicate infection or other conditions. It is important to start performing VSE early to learn what is normal for you and recognize any changes that occur. It is best to do this monthly in between menstrual periods.

- Perform the VSE in a well-lit area.
- Wash your hands before performing your VSE.
- Sit on a comfortable surface or stand with one foot propped up on a chair or bed.
- Hold a mirror in one hand and use the other hand to examine the vulva.
- Examine the parts of the vulva using sight and touch: the mons pubis; the left and right folds of the labia majora and minora; the clitoris and its general area; the skin around the vaginal entrance; the perineum; and the perianal area.

What to look for:

- Changes in appearance, such as a new mole, wart, lump or other growth; changes in skin color such as white, reddened or brown patches of skin; cuts or sores.
- Changes in the feel of the skin, paying careful attention to areas where you feel pain, itching, or other discomfort.
- During visual inspection of the vulva, apply gentle pressure to the vulvar skin to check for lumps.

\*Source: <https://www.nva.org/learnpatient/vulvar-self-examination/>

## Vulva Hygiene

These are some basic hygiene practices that can help to keep your vulva (and vagina) healthy and happy!

- Wash regularly with mild soap and warm water. When it comes to vulvar care, it's important not to overdo it. Your vagina contains good bacteria that keep your vagina clean and healthy. Over-washing can disrupt the balance of good bacteria and lead to infections.
- Avoid douching. This can upset the natural balance of organisms in your vagina. Your vagina is self-cleaning, so douching is not needed!
- Avoid laundry detergents or menstrual products that contain harsh ingredients. This includes avoiding fabric softeners and detergents with enzymes (amylase, lipase, protease and cellulose) and perfumed or scented soaps, sprays, deodorants or tampons.
- Wear cotton underwear instead of nylon, which can trap heat and moisture, providing an ideal environment for organisms that can cause infection.
- Change out of bathing suits or sweaty workout clothes ASAP to prevent infections. Wash them between uses.
- Don't leave tampons in for longer than eight hours. Doing so can put you at risk of toxic shock syndrome.

### **Vulva Self-Portrait**

Again, this may feel uncomfortable at first, but since you've already checked out your vulva and are performing regular VSEs, this should be a piece of cake!

- Grab a mirror and find a quiet, private place.
- Use the mirror to look at your vulva. Try doing this mindfully- with **curiosity**, an **open mind**, and **no judgment**. Notice what thoughts, emotions, or sensations arise.
- Use whatever materials you like- acrylic paint, watercolor, pastels, crayons, pencils, clay, or collage material- and create a portrait of your vulva. This doesn't have to be realistic; let your creativity shine through and play!
- Consider making a series of portraits over time to see how your view of your vulva changes.

Questions for reflection:

- How does this image make you feel?
- If your image could talk, what would it say?
- What part of your image are you most drawn to? Why?
- Has anything shifted regarding how you view your vulva?

## Dialogue with Your Vulva

Yep, you heard correctly- talking with your vulva! This technique is based on Lucia Capacchione's method of using your dominant and non-dominant hands while writing to stimulate and integrate both sides of the brain to process emotions and access the subconscious.\*

- Choose a colored pencil/crayon/marker to represent yourself. Choose a second color to represent your vulva.
- With your dominant hand (speaking as you and using the color that represents you), write a question to your vulva. With your non-dominant hand (speaking as your vulva with the color that represents your vulva) write a response.
- Try not to overthink it; write whatever immediately comes to mind.
- Engage in the dialogue for as long as you wish!
- When you finish, thank your vulva for connecting with you.

Questions to consider:

- How does your vulva feel?
- How does it feel about how you have treated it?
- How does it feel towards you?
- How do you feel about your vulva?
- How do you feel about how you've treated it?
- What message does your vulva have for you?
- What's something kind you can say to your vulva?

\*Source: Capacchione, L. (2021). Recovery of your inner child.

## Your Vulva's Story

Our personal stories are made up of a blend of our personal, familial, and cultural experiences. This exercise helps you start to acknowledge and process your experiences related to menstrual and sexual health and how they have influenced your relationship with your body.

- Gather any materials you would like to use- paint, watercolor, collage, pastels, colored pencils, crayons, or found objects.
- Consider your **personal experiences** with menstruation, sexuality, your vulva, or reproductive health. What stands out to you? What had the most impact on you? How do you feel about those things?
- Now, think about your **familial experiences** with reproductive and sexual health. What beliefs were you taught by your family? What were your mother's/sister's experiences with menstruation or their bodies? How did your father approach sexual or menstrual health with you?
- Consider **cultural influences** on sexuality, mensuration, and body image. What messages have you received from social media, movies, or other people? How have these messages influenced your relationship with your body? How realistic do you feel these standards/beliefs are?
- Use images, shapes, color, or words to create an image representing your vulva's story.

### Questions for reflection:

- How does this image make you feel?
- If your image could talk, what would it say?
- What part of your image are you most drawn to? What part is difficult to see?
- What beliefs about sexual or reproductive health do you want to carry with you? What do you want to release?
- Has anything shifted regarding how you view your vulva?

## The Female Genital Self-Image Scale (FGSIS)

This scale was developed by Herbenick et al. (2011) to measure genital self-image. You can take this once or repeatedly to see how your score changes over time.

Rate each statement:

**(1) Strongly Disagree**

**(2) Disagree**

**(3) Agree**

**(4) Strongly Agree**

1. I feel positively about my genitals
2. I am satisfied with the appearance of my genitals
3. I would feel comfortable letting a sexual partner look at my genitals
4. I think my genitals smell fine
5. I think my genitals work the way they are supposed to work
6. I feel comfortable letting a healthcare provider examine my genitals
7. I am not embarrassed about my genitals

\*Source: [Herbenick et al. \(2011\)](#)

## Identifying Vulva Shame

The vulva is *just* a body part, like arms, toes, or ears. No two vulvas are alike, and there is a wide range of what is “normal” and healthy. So why do so many vulva owners struggle with shame, embarrassment, or discomfort related to their own vulvas?

Before getting to the *why*, it is essential to name the *what*- **shame**. Shame is an emotional response to feeling **inadequate, unworthy, or not meeting personal or societal standards** and is often related to one’s actions, appearance, or identity. Shame makes you want to hide those perceived “flaws”, which only makes the shame grow. We need to “name it to tame it”- call it what it is (shame!) and talk openly about it with a trusted person (it’s uncomfortable, I know, but it’s the only way to kill shame).

So where does **vulva shame**, specifically, come from?

A combination of cultural, societal, and historical factors have shaped attitudes toward female bodies and sexuality. The following are some sources for why you may feel discomfort around the vulva.

- **Cultural and Religious Beliefs:** Many cultures and religious doctrines have placed restrictions on female sexuality, often associating it with shame or sin.

- **Societal and Gender Norms:** Many cultures also have long-standing taboos surrounding female sexuality. Women are often socialized to suppress sexual expression, which can lead to the belief that certain parts of the female body are not to be discussed or openly celebrated.

- **Sexualization and Objectification of the Female Body:** Historically, female bodies have been seen more as objects of male pleasure instead of sources of independent joy or empowerment.

- **Media Representations:** The ways female bodies are portrayed in media create unrealistic beauty standards, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy if one’s vulva doesn’t “measure up” to that narrow standard of attractiveness. For example, porn often perpetuates the standard that vulvas are smooth, pink, hairless, symmetrical, and “tucked in”, which is not what most vulvas look like in reality.

- **Lack of education:** The lack of comprehensive sexual education in our society leads many to grow up without a proper understanding of their bodies or knowledge that there is a wide range of diversity in the female body with no one “normal” body.

- **Negative experiences:** Personal experiences of body shaming, bullying, or sexual trauma can deeply impact one’s view of their vulva and body.

## Combating vulva shame starts with YOU!

Below are some ways you can help create a cultural shift around female bodies and sexuality.

- **Education:** Educating yourself (and others) lays the foundation for true empowerment and starts to dispel misinformation.

- **Create Open Dialogue:** We need to be talking about this. Like, A LOT. When we have open conversations about the vulva, it brings it out of the dark and into the light and starts to normalize for people that this is, in fact, something we can (and should) be talking about.

- **Embrace Diversity in Female Bodies:** We all look different, and that is normal and beautiful (can you imagine how boring it would be if we all looked the same?). We need to embrace this diversity instead of making people feel they have to measure up to whatever impossible beauty standard is currently trendy.

- **Celebrate Female Sexuality in a Positive and Non-Objectifying Way:** Sexuality is a normal and healthy part of a person's life, whether they have a vulva or not. Everyone should be able to fully embrace and enjoy that part of their life without shame.

## Addressing Body Image and Vulva Appearance Anxiety

Societal and media standards, lack of sexual health education, and negative personal experiences contribute to poor body image and anxiety about one's appearance. Many vulva owners experience some form of **vulva appearance anxiety** or embarrassment. Some have even opted for surgical procedures to "fix" their labia. Labiaplasty, a female cosmetic genital surgery to reduce the size or change the shape of the labia, has become a common procedure, and rates for it increased by 50% from 2014-2018 in the US\*. The following are some ways to combat body image concerns with your vulva (or any other part of your body).

### - Identifying and Reframing Cognitive Distortions

Individuals with vulva appearance anxiety may experience **cognitive distortions** (irrational or biased ways of thinking), which can exacerbate feelings of insecurity or shame. The following are some examples of possible cognitive distortions one may experience related to vulva appearance anxiety and ways to reframe these ways of thinking.

**Catastrophizing:** This is when someone assumes the worst-case scenario, like thinking, "If my vulva doesn't look perfect, I will be rejected, and no one will ever want to be with me."

*Reframe: "Everyone's vulva looks different, and that is normal. I don't have any evidence that indicates I will not find a partner because of my vulva's appearance."*

**Labeling:** Assigning a global negative label based on a single characteristic, like thinking, "Because my vulva is asymmetrical, I am ugly."

*Reframe: "My vulva is unique to me, and its appearance doesn't determine my value or beauty."*

**All-or-nothing thinking:** Viewing things in black-and-white terms, such as "If my vulva doesn't look exactly like I think it should, it is unattractive."

*Reframe: "My ideas of what a vulva 'should' look like may be based on unrealistic standards. Every vulva is different, and that is normal and healthy."*

**Personalization:** Believing that others are constantly judging you or focusing on your vulva's appearance. For example, "When someone looks at me, they are probably judging how my vulva looks."

*Reframe: "I don't know for sure what someone else is thinking, and my feelings about my own body are making it feel more likely that others will feel the same way about it."*

\*Source: <https://www.theaestheticsociety.org/media/procedural-statistics>

**Overgeneralization:** Making broad conclusions based on a single event for perception, like thinking, “Someone once made a negative comment about my vulva, and so everyone must think it is unattractive.”

*Reframe: “Just because one person said something negative does not mean that is an absolute fact and that others will think the same thing.”*

**Mindreading:** Assuming you know what others are thinking, such as, “They think my vulva looks weird, even if they haven’t said it.”

*Reframe: “I have no way of knowing for certain what someone else is thinking. It is more likely that my feelings about my own body are making it feel more likely that others will judge me negatively.”*

**Filtering/Disqualifying the Positive:** Focusing only on the perceived imperfections and ignoring positive aspects. For example, only thinking about the parts of your vulva you don’t like and ignoring the parts you do like. This leads to a distorted view of the body.

*Reframe: Identifying positive or even neutral aspects about your vulva*

**Should statements:** Having rigid expectations about how things ‘should’ be. For instance, “My vulva should look smooth and symmetrical.”

*Reframe: “There isn’t one ‘normal’ vulva; every vulva differs in shape, size, and color, and that is what is normal.”*

**Emotional Reasoning:** Seeing emotions as facts, like thinking, “Because I feel insecure about my vulva, I must be unattractive, and others must think that, too.”

*Reframe: “Just because I feel insecure about my vulva right now doesn’t mean I’m unattractive or that others think the same. Feelings are temporary, and they don’t define my worth.”*

### **- Understanding Anatomy**

Learning about anatomy (like in this project!) and remembering that there is a wide range of natural variation in vulvas and no single “normal” or “ideal” appearance. Normal vulvas vary in size, shape, and color.

### **- Focus on Function rather than Appearance**

The vulva’s purpose is to support reproductive and sexual health. Its two jobs are to provide protection for sexual organs and to provide *pleasure*! It is more important to appreciate how it serves those purposes rather than how it looks.

### **- Avoid Comparing**

With easy access to social media and explicit content, it is easy to compare oneself to unrealistic or doctored images. Remember that these representations are often not real or are manipulated and don’t accurately reflect healthy bodies.

### **- Work on Self-Compassion**

Your body is yours and is unique to you, and it does a lot FOR you. It is important to treat it with respect and kindness for all the things it allows you to do. Dr. Kristin Neff is a great resource on self-compassion (<https://self-compassion.org/>).

*\*\*If you’re still struggling with body image concerns, talking with a therapist who specializes in body image issues could provide a safe place to work through these feelings.*

## Addressing Sexual Trauma

**Sexual assault** is any form of unwanted sexual contact and impacts those with and without a vulva, although rates are much higher for vulva owners. Statistics show that 1 in 5 women have experienced attempted or completed rape and 81% of women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and or assault in their lifetime.\*

Sexual trauma can significantly impact a person's relationship with their body in various ways. Feelings of **shame, guilt, or disgust** resulting from these experiences are common and may become internalized, particularly regarding one's body.

- **Shame or discomfort:** Individuals may associate genitals with a traumatic experience, leading to shame or discomfort. Some may avoid looking at or touching their genitals or may feel a detachment from a part of their body that is meant to be pleasurable.
- **Loss of autonomy/control:** Trauma can disrupt a person's sense of bodily autonomy, making it difficult to feel ownership over their own bodies. Some may view the vulva or genitals as something that has been violated rather than something that belongs to them.
- **Body dysmorphia/distorted perception of the body:** Sexual trauma can cause an individual to develop distorted views of their vulva or genitals, perceiving them as unappealing, damaged, or "wrong", even if there was no physical injury.
- **Sexual functioning/intimacy issues:** Difficulties with desire, arousal, and orgasm are common in those who have experienced sexual trauma. Some may also experience pain or discomfort during sex (dyspareunia), leading to further negative associations with the vulva or genitals.
- **Social/cultural influences:** Victim blaming and stigma around sexual assault can exacerbate feelings of shame.

*\*\*If you have experienced sexual trauma, seeking a therapist who specializes in trauma can be an essential step to help you navigate the complexities of healing.*

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:** 800.656.HOPE (4673)

\*Source: <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

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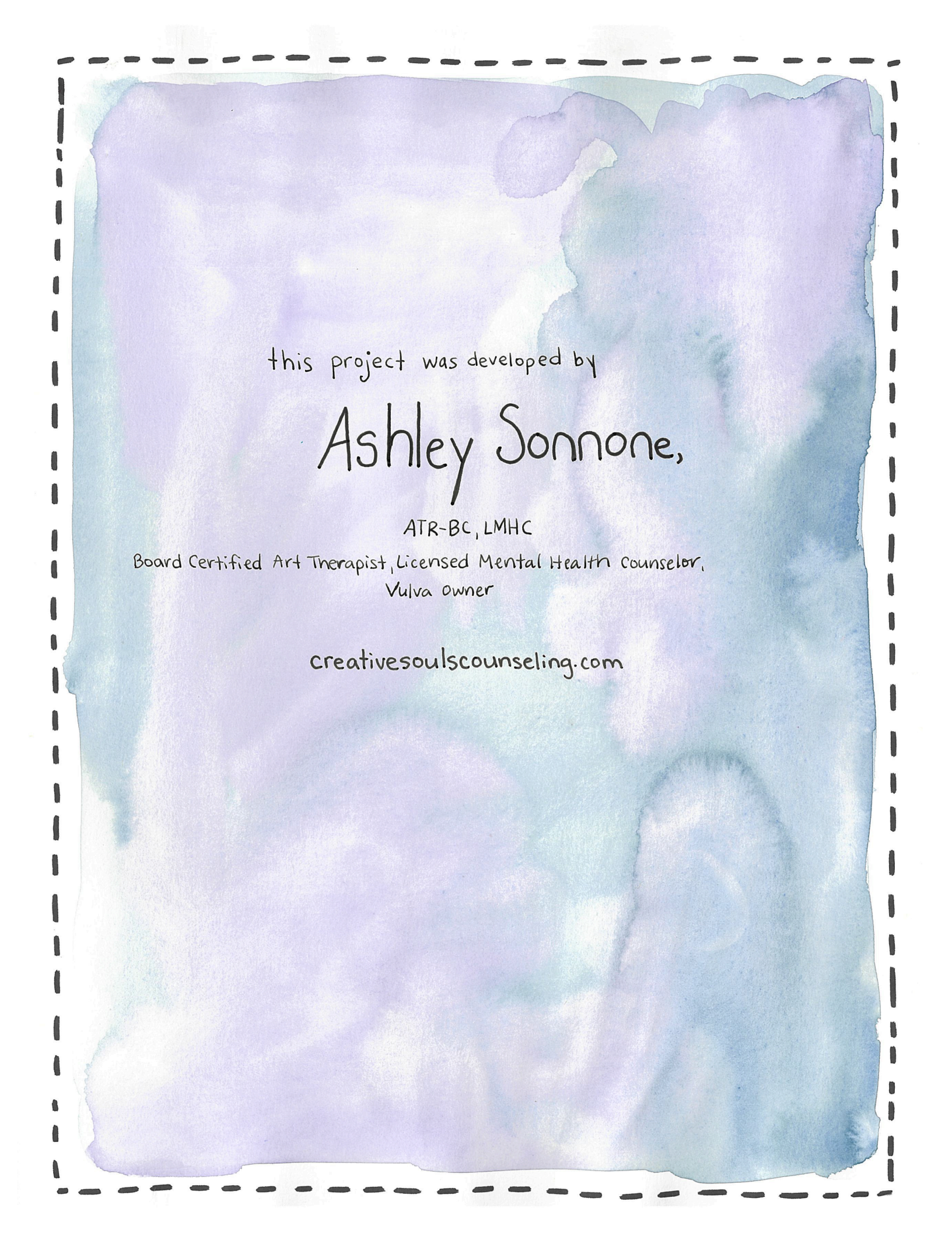
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\*Seeds of inspiration for this project were drawn from the +Cunt Project



this project was developed by

Ashley Sonnone,

ATR-BC, LMHC

Board Certified Art Therapist, Licensed Mental Health counselor,  
Vulva owner

[creativesoulsounseling.com](http://creativesoulsounseling.com)