



**ELIN EKHOLM** is a licensed clinical psychologist and a researcher at the Center for Health and Medical Psychology (CHAMP) at Örebro University. She got her master's degree from Umeå University in 2011 and went on to work as a clinical psychologist in outpatient psychiatric care and later in pain rehabilitation until becoming a full-time PhD student in 2016. Her main research interest is in vulvovaginal pain, specifically how women's experiences and behaviors can be understood from a relational perspective, and how affected couples can cope with pain. In addition to her work as a researcher, Elin teaches at the psychologist program with a focus on clinical psychology and a special interest in women's health, sexual health, and intimate partner violence.

Vulvodynia is a persistent and debilitating pain condition with extensive impact on the sexual lives and relationships of those affected. It is characterized by pain in the vulva upon touch or pressure, with painful sex as the hallmark symptom often creating sexual distress and dissatisfaction in the relationship. In response to pain many women avoid intimacy altogether, while others continue to endure painful sex. This dissertation aims to develop the understanding of these behaviors further by considering vulvodynia from a relational perspective, including both the individual woman, the couple and the wider normative contexts.

Results from the three included studies show that the relational and normative context is important for women's experiences of vulvodynia and their pain-related behaviors. More specifically, on the individual level women's relational cognitions are related to their coping behaviors, and on the dyadic level partners' responsiveness during sexual communication is associated with women's sexual assertiveness and pain intensity. On the normative level access to alternative sexual scripts appears associated with a different experience of vulvodynia.

Based on previous research and the findings in this dissertation a new theoretical model, the Interpersonal Pain Coping Model of Vulvodynia, is proposed as a way of integrating contextual factors such as partner behaviors and sexual scripts into the understanding of women's behavioral response to vulvodynia.

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ELIN EKHOLM Painful Sex in Context

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## Understanding Vulvodynia from a Relational Perspective

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*Psychology*



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