

What I Wish I'd Known Before Getting a Tattoo

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Due to my absurdly low pain tolerance, getting a [tattoo](#) was always one of those things I thought I could never handle. Still, I'd tell people that *if* I ever got one, it would have to be an octopus. In college, I read [an article in the feminist journal *Differences*](#) about the sailor-devouring octopus in Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* and how it represented the power of the vagina. What an empowering image, I thought — for someone with less sensitive skin.

Four years later, I met [Sue Jeiven](#), a tattoo artist at Brooklyn's [East River Tattoo](#) who customizes all her drawings. She described covering a man's arms in whales before he left his job as a scientist to become a sailor. Since I was in the process of moving out of my apartment to become a digital nomad, his story inspired me. Before I knew it, I was blurting out, "could you do an octopus?"

By that point, the pain didn't matter. I needed that octopus on my body. That tattoo represented breaking free from my old inhibited personality and buttoned-up lifestyle and becoming a force of nature like that creature. So, last December, I booked a consultation with Sue.

Despite all the thought I gave to the design, I didn't give much to the process itself, other than googling "how to make tattoos [less painful](#)." Throughout the experience, though, I learned a lot more. Here are some things I discovered — and probably should've learned earlier.

1. You should have a connection with your tattoo artist.

You two are co-creating something that'll be on your body forever, so it's okay to be selective. In fact, you *should* be. A good tattoo artist won't just discuss the technical stuff. They'll have a conversation to understand your personality, your concerns, and what design fits you. Sue and I talked about all the changes going on in my life, and I can see them reflected in the wildness of my octopus, which makes me love it even more. She recommends paying attention to little things like how smoothly the appointment scheduling process goes and how friendly the person who greets you in the shop is. Many tattoo artists will offer consultations before you get your tattoo, so take advantage of that. Make sure you're comfortable asking questions and voicing what you want.

2. You

may regret

sacrificing design for comfort.

I initially considered switching to a simpler design, like just a few lines in an octopus shape, but Sue encouraged me to tell her exactly what was in my heart before bringing in logistical considerations. I described a fierce-looking animal with its tentacles wrapped around a ship's sails. Once I articulated that vision, I knew a few lines wouldn't do. If you don't have a clear idea of what you want, Sue recommends going with something simple to minimize pain your first time. But if you feel strongly about a design, don't compromise it. In hindsight, most people don't regret putting up with extra pain for a design they love. They regret getting tattoos they don't love to save themselves a few minutes of pain. Plus, you can drastically reduce the pain (more on that later).

3. Numbing cream will be your best friend.

Sue didn't tell me this at first because she wanted to see if I was passionate enough about the design to want it even if it hurt. Then, she took out the 5% Lidocaine, and I have never felt so relieved. Most people will feel little to no pain if they use numbing cream, she says. Unfortunately, I'm one of the few who feels significant pain regardless. But honestly, if I can get through it, anyone can. There are no disadvantages to using Lidocaine, says [dermatologist Dr. Anna Avaliani](#). If your tattoo shop doesn't have it, you can get 4% or 5% Lidocaine over the counter yourself. And if you think you might be super sensitive, you can get up to 20% Lidocaine prescribed by a doctor to numb things out even more.

4. Some body parts are more sensitive than others.

The most painful places to get tattoos are over bones and major organs, says Sue. [Dr. Avaliani](#) agrees: The less fat, the less cushion. So, if you're worried about pain, you may not want to emulate [Ariana Grande's finger tattoos](#). The knees and chest can also be trouble. The arms, thighs, shoulders, and back are the easiest to tolerate, since the skin there mostly covers muscle and fat.

5. To reduce pain further, take an Ibuprofen beforehand.

[Dr. Avaliani](#) recommends taking three or four Ibuprofen tablets an hour before your appointment so that your pain tolerance is higher by the time you feel the needle (which, by the way, looks more like the tip of a pen than a needle, in case that word scares you like it scared me).

6. During the tattoo itself, talking helps a lot.

Though the numbing cream and Ibuprofen helped, what really got me through the experience was telling Sue the story of how me and my partner met. The task of recalling all the details forced me to stay focused on something other than the pain. My voice would occasionally get louder, which was probably entertaining for the other people in the shop, but having that excuse to shout probably helped, too. Some clients instead will count backwards from four, since it takes around four seconds to create each line, says Sue. Others will bring friends, though not all

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tattoo parlors allow this. Don't be shy — if there's anything that'll help keep your mind off the pain, go for it (as long as it doesn't distract your tattoo artist or move the body part where you're getting the tattoo).

7. Another weird trick: eat candy.

There's a bowl of candy in East River Tattoo, and it's not just there to give customers something to snack on. Food actually turns off your body's fight or flight response, says Sue, since you can't fight or flee while you're eating. So, she offers Starbursts to clients right as the process begins to help calm their nerves. It also helps keep up your blood sugar, which can drop in anxiety-inducing situations. On top of that, chewing serves as a distraction in a similar way that talking does, which is why Sue likes to chew gum when she gets tattoos. Since you don't want to move the body part getting tattooed, moving your mouth is a safer way to release tension.

8. Don't freak out, but some tattoo ink can get moldy.

The FDA recently [updated its website](#) with a warning that 363 people have had negative reactions to tattoos from 2004-2016. Because ink is not FDA regulated, it can get moldy, grow bacteria, or contain unsafe ingredients. To be safe, you should make sure your tattoo artist opens and cleans the needle in front of you. Ask them where they got the ink, and make a note of it in case you develop an allergic reaction, [says Dr. Avaliani](#). If you have any allergies, tell your tattoo artist beforehand to ensure nothing you're allergic to is in the ink. And, of course, find a reputable parlor. This is not a time to pinch pennies. Sue suggests getting recommendations from friends or, at the very least, reading Yelp reviews.

9. You shouldn't get tattoos over birthmarks or moles.

Doctors check moles and birthmarks for changes that could indicate skin cancer, says Dr. Avaliani. If you cover them up, it could become harder to detect signs of melanoma or other cancers, so you're best off leaving them visible, to be safe.

10. It's normal for it to get flaky afterward!

When I first noticed the skin where I got my tattoo flaking, I freaked out and thought the whole tattoo was coming off. Don't worry — that's not what's going on. "As the tattoo pigment is incorporated in the skin, some of the skin cells shed off causing flakiness," says [Dr. Avaliani](#). "The whole tattoo process is also irritating to the skin, so the skin is trying to heal itself." Your tattoo artist will give you a cream to minimize the itchiness.

11. If there's anything you don't like, speak up.

I love my tattoo, but there's one little thing I'm not totally happy with. When Sue drew the design on a translucent sheet and held it up to my arm (which most tattoo artists do first to make sure you like it), I thought it was too close to my chest and not far enough out on my arm. I also suspected it would hurt more on my inner arm. But, I went with it in the moment. It turned

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out it really was too sensitive there for her to completely finish, so we had to change the design a little, and the placement looks slightly off to me. If anything bothers you when that initial sheet is held up, say something. Don't feel scared of being too demanding or intimidated about being a newbie. The staff want to make this experience special for you. "We're really honored to be your first tattoo," says Sue. "We've all been there."

12. Your tattoo will probably change meaning over time.

People always warn you to wait until you're really passionate about a symbol before getting your first tattoo, but if you really want a tattoo, it'll probably take on meaning over time, says Sue. On the flip side, even if you have a clear idea of what your tattoo means, that meaning could change. Mine took on a whole new meaning after reading about futuristic cephalopods in the sci-fi story, "Story of Your Life." If you're not sure what to get for your first design, Sue recommends something like an animal that's rich in symbolism. Whatever the tattoo itself is, it'll become a relic of a time in your life — "a permanent reminder of a temporary situation," as Sue puts it. "If you get something that has layered meanings to it, over time, it becomes such a part of you that you won't regret it."