



Vicious Cycle

Extreme symptoms around your period may be dismissed as 'just' PMS. Rebecca Keane investigates PMDD, a troubling condition that can have serious consequences

As women, we're conditioned not to complain of pain or discomfort. Because of that, we all know it can get to a point where we're breathless with pain but won't seek the help we need. With periods, we're told from a young age that we bleed once a month and there are tampons and pads to "deal with that" but not much else. No one forewarns you of the volcanic PMS which can split your world apart in the days upcoming to your period which brings unending tears, the unpredicted mood swings and major irritability - and that's only the days before the main event! While we dread our periods and complain of the insane symptoms they can bring, there can be a point for some women where it just gets too much and more days of the month than not are taken over by what feels like extreme PMS.

Please welcome to the stage the evil cousin of PMS - premenstrual

dysphoric disorder or PMDD. PMDD is a condition in which sufferers feel severe irritability, depression and or anxiety in the week or two before your period starts, with symptoms usually lessening two to three days after your period begins. While there isn't much medical information about the disorder and it goes largely unreported, in May 2019 PMDD was added to the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases by the World Health Organisation.

Hormone specialist Dr Marion Gluck reports that PMDD is more common in women than we think. "PMDD is now categorised as a depressive disorder with a recognised prevalence ranging from 3% to 5% among people who menstruate."

But while most PMS sufferers will vow their symptoms are beyond terrible, how do we differentiate PMDD and PMS? "PMDD is a severe form of premenstrual syndrome which can cause myriad emotional and physical symptoms each

month during the week or two before your period starts. Most women will experience recurrent mild symptoms of PMS but with PMDD, the symptoms are intense and seriously impact on one's ability to function" says Dr Gluck.

"Symptoms are both cyclical and chronic, improving once the period starts. Hormonal life events such as pregnancy, childbirth, perimenopause and postpartum depression can be triggered due to rapid hormonal fluctuations."

For a woman to receive a PMDD diagnosis, a patient must have at least five out of 11 symptoms that occur during the week before menstruation and improve within a few days after a period starts and for those to occur for at least a couple of months. These symptoms include mood swings, irritability and anger, anxiety and feelings of tension, depression, fatigue, suicidal thoughts, physical symptoms (breast tenderness, aching muscles and joints), bloating, headaches, feeling out of control, lack of concentration or trouble thinking, food cravings/binge eating and insomnia or hypersomnia.

While those symptoms can sound very common for anyone with a period incoming, Dr Gluck maintains that patients with PMDD can often be given the wrong diagnosis if the repetitive nature of the symptoms aren't spotted. "It can be misdiagnosed as anxiety, depression or a personality disorder and doctors can fail to spot the cyclical link, especially if symptoms start at ovulation and don't stop until the end of the period."

One woman susceptible to confusing anxiety and depression with PMDD was Leslie, 43, who, with a history of mental health issues, has always struggled with her sudden changing emotions but could never figure out why.

"I had noticed that my emotions were beginning to split into almost a Jekyll and Hyde situation. I would have periods of time where I felt on top of everything, then bam - I would fall down a very dark rabbit hole of anxiety, depression, paranoia and worse of all suicidal ideation. I had never heard of PMDD so I assumed my mental health was just beginning to deteriorate, a lot" says Leslie.

"I became so desperate to stop the pain of it all that I wrote a will along with a goodbye and emailed it to myself so if anything happened to me, my family would find it, but I did not want to leave them. So I had started to research it myself to see if anyone out there felt the same or had advice. That's when I first read about PMDD."

Despite knowing of PMDD herself, years of attending doctors who were

uninformed about the disorder led Leslie down a dark path as she desperately struggled to deal with the chaos her mind and body were inflicting on her. "In March 2020 I had an extreme episode which led to a breakdown. I was linked in with an emergency suicide nurse specialist and finally put under the care of the mental health service. Finally, at 42 years old my psychiatrist diagnosed me with PMDD."

After receiving a diagnosis, then comes treatment. Dr Gluck notes there are both temporary and more radical solutions, including SSRI medication and/or the combined oral contraceptive pill, or even more invasive medical procedures with lasting effects both physiologically and psychologically.

For some women, knowing what's going on and what to expect each month can help - just having a name for what's wrong. Natural remedies like vitamin supplements also may relieve symptoms of the disorder; magnesium, Vitamin B6, Agnus Castus or chasteberry can calm the nervous system and relieve symptoms of mood swings and irritability.

After some time in talk therapy and trying multiple brands of SSRI (anti-depressant) medication before finding the right one, Leslie was put on a low dosage and felt well. However, the unpredictability of PMDD remains exhausting. "PMDD is like living with a narcissistic enemy that wants you to fail. There are months that I do all the right things, exercise, a good diet high in fruit and vegetables and try to cut out sugar. But then there's months that my mind sabotages my attempt to survive. The idea of doing something positive is horrifically difficult and you get sucked into this deep dark place."

"I don't even know if PMDD will go until after the menopause - I have looked into the opinion of having a hysterectomy but I'm not sure it's right for me."

Leslie's experience might seem extreme, but sadly it's not uncommon. While going through a PMDD diagnosis and indeed the disorder itself can feel extremely isolating for sufferers, Leslie said the PMDD Ireland support group on Facebook has helped her greatly.

She has also dedicated her life to educating others of PMDD and spreading awareness about this misunderstood disorder through her teenage mental health charity, Laochas the Warrior Soul Project. She hopes to incorporate a workshop on PMDD to inform girls of symptoms at a very early age. Knowledge is power, ladies.

