



## Depression - A Slow Poison Affecting Women's Life

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### ABSTRACT

Depression has become one of the most leading causes of disability worldwide. It not only affects the individual but also the people around them. Women, whose mental health and well being are neglected becomes the most common victim of this disorder. Influence of hormonal changes associated with the various stages of women's life make the most important contributing factor for depression in women. The social status, violence against women, trauma, disadvantaged position of women and multiples roles of women make them more prone to depression. The early detection and treatment can make the life of these affected women better.

**Keywords:** Depression, Perimenopausal, Perinatal, Premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

### INTRODUCTION

Depression is a very common mental disorder that can be presented as depressive mood, decreased energy, disturbed sleep, decreased appetite, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self esteem and poor concentration<sup>1</sup>. In addition to that, depression often comes along with symptoms of anxiety. Sometimes this depressive disorder can become very chronic and recurrent that it can lead to substantial impairment in person's ability to carry out his or her day to day responsibilities. And at its case scenario, depression can often lead to suicide. According WHO 2012, for every person who completes a suicide, 20 or more people may attempt to end their life<sup>2</sup>.

Even though depression is a leading cause for mental disability in both males and females, WHO (2008) says that women are burdened 50% more than the males. Depression can affect every area of a women's life like her social life, family relationships, career and her sense of self worth and purpose. Moreover, depression is one of the leading causes of disease burden for women of low-income, middle income as well as high income family. There are many factors that can contribute to this depression in women, which can range from female reproductive hormones to social pressure to the female response to the stress<sup>3</sup>.

#### Factors Contributing to Depression in Women

It is found that the women of child bearing age are at greater risk of developing depressive disorder. Psychological events like role stress, sex-specific socialization, victimization, internalization, coping mechanism and style, disadvantaged social status are some of the contributing factors that lead to the vulnerability of women to depressive disorders. In addition to these, domestic violence, which affects 25-

50% of women at some point in their life, is also an important contributing factor for depression<sup>4</sup>.

Nowadays as women are expanding their career options, they are also affected by the emotional stress it causes. Women working for long hours with strict deadlines make them more prone to depressive disorder and anxiety compared to women working in lesser levels of psychological demands. Work pressure makes them skip meals and force them to go for junk food which can indirectly contribute to depression. For the reason of job security, women tend not to take leave even when unwell and neglect their health. Factors like poor quality of sleep, lack of exercise, poor nutrition, exposure to industrial toxins and pollutants, excessive intake of alcohol and drug abuse can also contribute to depression<sup>5</sup>.

#### Causes of Depression in Women

There are many studies being carried out to explore the potential cause and contributing factors for the increased risk of depression in women. Genetic factors, biological, chemical, hormonal, psychological, social and environmental factors all intersect and contribute to the cause of depression<sup>6</sup>.

There are many triggers for a depressive episode. Stressful life events like trauma, bad relationship, stressful situation, physical abuse or loss of a loved one can trigger depressive episode. Studies have shown that women respond to stressful life situations in ways different from men making them more prone to depression<sup>7</sup>.

Medical and neurological causes of depression include cerebrovascular disease (CVD), epilepsy, HIV, autoimmune diseases, neoplasm and Myxedema Madness (MM). MM which is characterized by hypothyroidism associated with depression, fatigability and suicidal impulses, is more common in females<sup>8</sup>.



### Types of Depression Unique To Women

Throughout their life women undergo dramatic physical changes and hormonal changes which are associated with the different phases of their life. The menstrual cycle, pregnancy, the post partum period and the perimenopause contribute to all these changes. Due to these changes in different phases of a women's life, there are certain types of depression that are unique to women<sup>9</sup>. These include:

#### Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder is a health issue that is similar to that of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) but it is a little more serious type. PMDD usually happen a week or two before the periods and may get resolved within few days after the bleeding starts. Up to 5% of women of the child bearing age may get PMDD. The most common symptoms of PMDD include

- Irritability or anger that may affects others
- Feeling depressed, even suicidal ideation
- Tension or anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Mood swings or frequent crying spells
- Lack of interest in daily activities and relationships
- Food cravings or binge eating or decreased appetite
- Fatigue or low energy
- Feeling out of control

The exact cause of PMDD is unknown but researchers think that it may be an abnormal reaction associated with the hormonal changes during menstrual cycle. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that is associated with mood control, sleep, attention and pain. Studies have shown that there is a connection between low levels of serotonin and PMDD. The hormonal changes can cause a decrease in the serotonin level which can lead to PMDD symptoms<sup>10</sup>.

Treatment options for PMDD may include lifestyle changes as well as medications. Healthy life style changes like balanced diet with reduced sugar and salt, more physical activity, vitamin supplements may help in relieving symptoms of PMDD to some extent. Antidepressants of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) category like Sertaline, Fluoxetine and Paroxetine help in controlling PMDD symptoms.

#### Perinatal Depression/ Post Partum Depression

Perinatal depression is the type of depression that spans from the period of conception to a few months after child birth. Becoming a mother can be one of the happiest and biggest moments of a women's life, but it can also be the most stressful one. Women undergo a wide range of emotions, from being joyful and excited to being sad,

anxious, confused and overwhelmed. Women may undergo many physical changes like weight gain and may experience emotional changes which can contribute to depression. After giving birth, the hormone levels in a woman's body drops rather quickly, especially estrogen and progesterone, which can lead to chemical changes in the brain that may trigger the mood swings in a post partum women. In addition to all these sleep deprivation after childbirth can cause physical discomfort and exhaustion that can lead to the symptoms of post partum depression<sup>11</sup>. The symptoms of perinatal or postpartum depression include:

- Frequent crying spells or weeping
- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless or overwhelmed
- Irritable or restlessness
- Changes in appetite
- Trouble feeling connected to the baby
- Persistence doubting about her capability to care for the baby
- Self harm ideation or thinking about harming the baby
- Loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- Withdrawing from friends and family

Perinatal or the post partum depression may resolve on its own, but sometimes it may when left untreated it may last up to months or years affecting the mother's health as well as her ability to connect with the baby and care for the baby. Cognitive therapy and interpersonal therapy has been found to be helpful in treating this kind of depression. The medication commonly used is antidepressant SSRI after consultation with the doctor for its safety while pregnancy and lactation<sup>12</sup>. Studies have found that mothers who breastfed the baby for at least 3 months continuously have less incidence rate and severity of post partum pregnancy.

#### Perimenopausal Depression

Perimenopause is the transition a women go through prior to menopause that may cause abnormal periods, insomnia, erratic fluctuations in hormonal levels and sometime hot flashes for many women. Fluctuating levels of female hormone estrogen and progesterone contribute to depression by decreased stimulation of serotonin<sup>13</sup>. It is believed that a women in perimenopausal phase is as much as three times more prone to develop depression compared to that of pre-menopausal women. Some of the symptoms include:

- Hot flashes
- Painful intercourse
- Irritability
- Decreased concentration and memory difficulty



- Feeling sad, profound despair and depressed
- Mood liability

The good news is that depression does not have to be an inevitable part of perimenopause. Healthy life style modifications can help in controlling perimenopausal depression symptoms to some extent. These include getting enough sleep, regular exercise and rhythmic breathing. The treatment options available for perimenopausal depression include Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), antidepressants (SSRI) or both<sup>14</sup>.

### Depression in Elderly

As we age, the chances of depression increases as we often face major changes in our life. Health problems, feeling of loneliness and isolation, reduced sense of purpose, recent bereavements and fear over death, financial problems can contribute to depression in elderly women<sup>15</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

Women of all age groups are affected by depression. The various roles played by a women as a daughter, mother, wife, employee all contribute to the stress thereby making women more susceptible for the risk of depression. The role of hormonal changes in women's life is most note-worthy contributor for depression in women. They contribute to certain types of depression that are unique to women. Moreover physical abuse and psychological trauma have their share in increasing the risk of depression. The neglect for mental health can lead to late detection of depression in women and may lead to chronic problems. If detected early and given proper care and treatment, depression does not have to be an inevitable part in a women's life.

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