

PMS and the Biological Flaws of Womanhood

FROM *Misdiagnosing the Body: Premenstrual Syndrome, Postmenstrual Syndrome, and Other Normal "Diseases"*

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Carol Tavis discusses how Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) came to be seen as a disease afflicting women. She traces the historical construction of this medical category and shows how it has become widely accepted by women as a way to understand changes in their moods and behaviors over the course of their menstrual cycle. While the construction of this category gives visibility to women's feelings of distress that doctors and psychologists had previously marginalized, Tavis argues that these benefits are overshadowed by the ways the PMS category stigmatizes women by legitimizing the notion that women's bodies are deficient and in need of fixing.

Conversation overheard in a Hollywood casting office, between a man and a woman angry at being kept waiting by a female casting director:

MAN: "It must be her time of the month."

WOMAN: "And how do we explain the rudeness of male casting directors?"

In 1975, when I was working for *Psychology Today* magazine, we ran a short article called "A Person Who Menstruates Is Unfit to Be a Mother." The author maintained that women are hypertense and anxious for the week before menstruation, moody and incapacitated for the week of menstruation, and utterly exhausted for the week after menstruation. How, then, could the complex care of children, which requires stamina, intelligence, and several advanced degrees, be entrusted to persons who are erratic and unreliable three weeks out of the month?

This essay poked delighted fun at the then-common argument that women's abilities are limited by their physiology. Edgar Berman, Hubert Humphrey's personal physician, had recently declared that women's "raging hormonal influences" made them unfit for political office. The Canadian anthropologist Lionel Tiger had publicly worried that female hormones were ruining women's entire intellectual lives: "An American girl writing her Graduate Record Examinations over a two-day period or a week-long set of finals during the premenstruum," he wrote, apparently with a straight face, "begins with a disadvantage which almost certainly condemns her to no higher than a second-class grade. A whole career in the educational system can be unfairly jeopardized because of this phenomenon."

So all of the second-class female students I knew were heartened by the burst of new research in the 1970s that was rapidly debunking many old myths and preconceptions about women's alleged physical limitations. Raging-hormone theories were on the way out, as research showed again and again that women were just as able as men to work, play, think, sing, pass exams, and otherwise carry on, even when they were menstruating, premenstruating, postmenstruating, and nonmenstruating.

It was too good to last, and it didn't. Today we are witnessing a rebirth of the belief in the unruly female body. A U.S. District Judge, hearing a recent sex discrimination case, commented that women "have a monthly problem which upsets them emotionally, and we all know that." Every week another story appears about how women's hormones affect women's personalities and behaviors, another research finding about sex differences in hormones and anatomy. On a basis of a single small study, "Female Sex Hormone Is Tied to Ability to Perform Tasks" was a front-page news story coast-to-coast, although no headline appeared to announce, as a much larger study found, "Male Sex Hormone Is Tied to Antisocial Behavior and Crime."

Hormone studies are part of an ongoing tidal wave of biological research in general, and much of this research has benefited women. Women should know that the physiological changes of the menstrual cycle vary enormously, that *normal* women range from having no pain or discomfort to having considerable though temporary pain. It is important for women to know that morning sickness during pregnancy is entirely a hormonal matter, and not, as a male physician once said to a friend of mine, "a woman's way of saying she doesn't want to be pregnant." It is important for women to know that hot flashes and vaginal dryness during menopause are likewise due to temporary hormonal changes, not to a neurotic loss of femininity or sexual inhibitions.