

maybe the real question is not why some women become irritable before menstruation, but why they aren't angry the rest of the month, and why they (and others) are so quick to dismiss their irritations as being mere symptoms of PMS. This trend deflects attention away from the real problems that a "PMS sufferer" might have: menstrual-cycle irregularities; chronic depression; or month-long grievances, such as family conflicts, low pay, long hours, or the housework blues. It also deflects attention away from the normal feelings of grumpiness, sadness, weariness, and other mood changes that both sexes can have any day of the month.

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DOCTORING THE FAILED FEMALE

Ultimately, the belief that menstruation and menopause are problems for women is part of a larger assumption that female physiology itself is abnormal, deficient, and diseased. But this view is so pervasive, it is easy to forget that it is not the only one possible.

In fact, the idea that menstruation is a problem for women (and their families) is new to this century. For most of human history, from the ancient Greeks until the late eighteenth century, medical writers assumed that male and female bodies were structurally similar, and that there was nothing inherently pathological or debilitating about menstruation. (They held many misconceptions about the magical powers of menstrual blood, but that's another story.) For example, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, when women were believed to be biologically similar to men, menstruation was considered a natural, unproblematic process.

In the nineteenth century, . . . a major transformation took place in the scientific and popular views of the female body. It was no longer seen as analogous to the male body, but as distinctly opposite, different. Menstruation became a symbol of that difference. Walter Heape, a zoologist at Cambridge University, wrote in his 1913 book *Sex Antagonism* that "the reproductive system is not only structurally but functionally fundamentally different in the Male and the Female; and since all other organs and systems of organs are affected by this system, it is certain that the Male and Female are essentially different throughout." Heape's description of menstruation, a "severe, devastating, periodic action," was, dare I say, hysterical. The menstrual flow, he wrote, leaves behind "a ragged wreck of tissue, torn glands, ruptured vessels,

jagged edges of stroma, and masses of blood corpuscles, which it would seem hardly possible to heal satisfactorily without the aid of surgical treatment."

Today, Heape's descriptions seem as outdated as the old brain studies do, and it would surely surprise no one to learn that Heape was a militant anti-suffragist. Yet the legacy of this attitude survives. It is much toned down, to be sure, but no less influential, and just as much a part of the political and social culture in which it occurs.

The view of menstruation as a monthly wound from which women must recover, along with the view of its sister sickness, menopause, are subtly enshrined in our language as processes that involve weaknesses, losses, and debilities. In a dazzling analysis of the language that describes menstruation and menopause in medical textbooks, Emily Martin showed how physicians, anatomists, and the public have come to regard these processes. Menstruation is *failed* conception; menopause is *failed* reproductive functions.

Thus, textbooks describe the process of menstruation in terms of deprivation, deficiency, loss, shedding, and sloughing. The fall in hormones "deprives" the uterine wall of its "hormonal support," "constriction" of blood vessels leads to a "diminished" supply of oxygen and nutrients, and finally "disintegration starts, the entire lining begins to slough, and the menstrual flow begins." The imagery of menstruation that Martin found in textbook after textbook is one of "catastrophic disintegration: 'ceasing,' 'dying,' 'losing,' 'denuding,' and 'expelling.'"

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Martin then casts her observant eye on the way textbooks describe sperm production and ejaculation. She finds not a whisper of information that the ejaculate is composed of shedded cells or any discussion of the processes of deterioration and renewal in the male reproductive system. Instead, there is much celebration of the "remarkable" male reproductive physiology. As one textbook author described it, "Perhaps the most amazing characteristic of spermatogenesis is its sheer magnitude: the normal human male may manufacture several hundred million sperm per day." This gee-whiz, ain't-it-remarkable tone is absent from descriptions of female reproduction. "Although this text sees such massive sperm production as unabashedly positive," Martin observes, "in fact, only about one out of every 100 billion sperm ever makes it to fertilize an egg: from the very same point of view that sees menstruation as a waste product, surely here is something really worth crying about!"

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