

DON'T LET PMS SLOW YOU DOWN

by Tracey P. Wood



Pre-menstrual Syndrome (PMS) is an illness that should not be taken lightly. For centuries, women have suffered from PMS but faced allegations of an imaginary illness. Although PMS was first written about in 1931, it wasn't until the 1950s when a female physician, Dr. Katharina Dalton, devoted time and energy to research the recurrences of the same medical conditions in women of childbearing age in relationship to their menstrual cycle. It is difficult for the illness to maintain its validity with all the comedians and sitcoms mocking its existence. It also hurts its reputability when many women use PMS as a blanket excuse for their actions.

For the woman truly suffering from this illness, PMS is a culprit that she wishes to escape. The following information provides the key for understanding PMS and techniques to rescue oneself from the illness.

PMS DEFINED

Approximately 85 percent of women in their childbearing years experience PMS at some point. PMS may be triggered by puberty, the loss of virginity, the birth of a child, a miscarriage, or stress from a dramatic experience. When the birth control pill is discontinued, PMS symptoms may appear or worsen.

There are many symptoms of PMS, but it is not the symptoms that deter-

mine the disease. It is determined by the timing in which the symptoms appear. Dr. Elizabeth Bettencourt, Chief of Outpatients, Walter Reed Medical Center, says, "There are two types of PMS. First, it (PMS) appears the second half of one's cycle (after ovulation); symptoms improve with the outset of one's period. The second truth is there has to be a time in the cycle when one is completely symptom free." A woman knows she has PMS if she experiences any (not all) of the following symptoms at the same time in her menstrual cycle each month.

- **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS:** Headaches, breast tenderness and swelling, weight gain and/or bloating, constipation, skin disorders, aches and pains (abdomen, back, knees, ankle, shoulders, hands, hips), cramps, alcohol intolerance, cardiac arrhythmias (irregular heartbeats), palpitations (heart pounding), hemorrhoids, infections, noise sensitivity, asthma, epilepsy, eye problems (conjunctivitis, glaucoma), nose and throat ailments (cold, hoarseness, hay fever, loss of smell), clumsiness and poor coordination, bruising, fainting and dizziness.

- **PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS:** Tension (trembles, difficulty breathing, grinding teeth, cracking knuckles, inability to concentrate, anxieties), irritability, depression, tiredness, fatigue, alcoholism, food cravings, indecisive-

ness, paranoia, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, withdrawal. Mood swings that cause you to feel out of control, suffer crying spells, experience forgetfulness, experience physical abuse, verbal abuse, and/or pick fights.

Do you or someone you know experience one or a group of these symptoms at the same time each month in relation to their menstrual cycle? The timing should be one to 14 days prior to menstruating. Relief of these symptoms occurs once menstruation begins.

Some in the medical profession believe that PMS is caused by the imbalance of hormones. After a woman reaches her fertile point (ovulation) for the month, the ovaries may not release the proper balance of estrogen and progesterone, and cause symptoms that cease once the cycle starts over with menstruation.

GAINING CONTROL

You must first identify whether you have PMS and realize you can gain control over your body. Severe cases of PMS may require medical treatment but, in most instances, women can successfully treat themselves with a change in diet, an exercise program, relaxation and over-the-counter pain relievers.

DIETS

Diets are mostly trial and error. A

well-balanced diet is recommended to help the body function better. Foods to avoid are salt if fluid is retained, caffeine if irritability and headaches appear, and sweets if one suffers from mood swings. Dr. Peter Schmidt, Chief of Reproductive Studies at the National Institutes of Health, has experienced varying results with diets. "Caffeine made some PMS patients more anxious, others found it helpful." He stated belief in an MIT study that recommended carbohydrates (sweets) to improve some PMS symptoms. Dr. Schmidt also suggested, "Exercise and eat frequent small meals instead of two or three large meals."

Give a diet a couple of months. The body may also experience withdrawal from the absence of a substance such as caffeine, only to feel better the following month. Add to your diet lots of fruits, vegetables, fiber and protein. Water may help your body function better. For a few months, try nuts, fruits and raw vegetables instead of sweet or salty snacks. Also try fruit juice, milk and water instead of cola or coffee.

EXERCISE

Exercise should be gradually introduced into your daily routine. If you suffer any medical conditions, check over your exercise plan with a doctor. Plan to do exercises you enjoy. Go for a 30-minute walk at lunch time or sometime during the day. Maybe you'd enjoy swimming, aerobics, tennis, racquet ball, jogging, bike riding or skating. Whatever activities you like, make plans to do them regularly. The idea is to exercise and increase blood circulation daily. Start your exercise program on the last day of or during your period. Then, by the time your symptoms are scheduled, you will hopefully notice an improvement.

Exercise allows the body to expel stress and tension that collects daily. It improves breathing, controls weight, suppresses appetite and can improve other bodily functions such as hormone production and menstrual flow.

RELAXATION AND PAIN RELIEF

Relaxation and pain relief are self-explanatory. Get plenty of rest during your PMS time. The rest will allow the body to combat the symptoms. If you

can, go to bed 30 minutes earlier or sleep in a little later. Learn deep breathing, positive thinking, muscle relaxation techniques, meditation and beauty visualization.

Cut out the "TO RELAX" panel in this article and carry it in your purse to handle stress emergencies. Check your library for other information on relaxation techniques. All of these techniques create a more relaxed and controlled person.

About pain, remember, besides drugs, there are other items such as heating pads, ice packs, etc. that can also relieve pain and cramps.

REINFORCEMENT FOR CONTROL

If your attempts to treat yourself are unsuccessful, visit a gynecologist or general practitioner. Schedule your appointment on a good day — not during your PMS. Be prepared for many questions and to work with the physician on solving the problem. The physician will want to know what you've already tried and for how long.

Medical treatment can include vitamin therapy, treatments for bloating and swelling, and hormone-balancing therapy, but remember, "We treat the symptoms, not PMS, because no one is certain what causes PMS," says Dr. Bettencourt.

Beside medical treatment, work to gain the support of those close few affected by your PMS. Don't take it for granted that family, friends and co-workers will understand. When you're not experiencing PMS, establish ways to cope better and talk to those around you about it. Let them know you are working on the problem and what they can do to help.

Always be willing to apologize and explain when you know you've mistreated someone, even if it's two weeks later. During some quiet time, think about the way you've handled situations. How would you feel if that person behaved that way toward you? How could you better handle that situation? Make a decision to join or form a PMS support group and share with other women how they are coping. Contact your base medical facility or state, county and federal health divisions to locate an existing group or to

start a group.

FAIRNESS TO YOURSELF AND TO OTHERS

PMS is not a license to go temporarily insane or "out of order" each month. Lock within yourself and to others for strength. Good, clear, positive communication during good days is key to soliciting support for your not-so-good days. Develop the discipline and knowledge needed to successfully treat PMS, and seek medical help if necessary. Why sentence yourself to regular days of misery? PMS is treatable. Your life can be fuller with good days every day when you're in control.

TO RELAX

DEEP BREATHING - Before responding to anything that is upsetting, take three deep breaths. At other times, take a moment alone to take in five long, slow, deep breaths. With your eyes closed, picture the count of 10 butterflies landing in a meadow on a bright sunny day as you inhale. Then, as you exhale, count the 10 butterflies one by one flying away. This method has been known to work while leaning against the wall of a ladies' room stall.

POSITIVE THINKING - Start the day with a period of quiet time to count how many things are great in your life. If you do this prior to PMS, it is easier to stay positive during PMS. Think about your job versus those unemployed. Think about the condition of your health compared to someone less fortunate. Think about your family's health. Consider your home to those who are homeless.

MUSCLE RELAXATION - Find a quiet, comfortable spot to lie down or sit. Once there, loosen clothing and concentrate on every part of your body. If that part seems tense, allow it to go limp like a noodle. Start at your feet, tense each muscle and then let it go. This allows you to better identify when tension attacks your body.

BEAUTY VISUALIZATION - Similar to the butterfly count in deep breathing, close your eyes and attempt to relive a joyous moment in your life, experience a beautiful scene or enjoy the visualization of the perfect world and the life you'd love.

All of these techniques are simple and work wonders. Don't save them for PMS — use them throughout the month.