



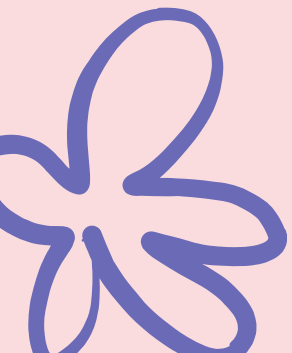
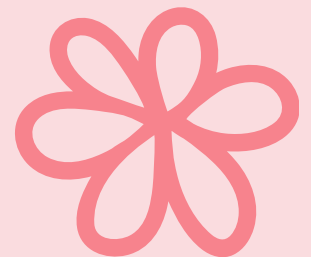
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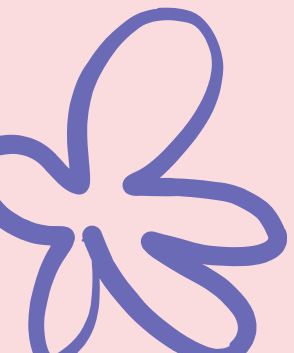




You don't have to be positive all the time. It's perfectly okay to feel sad, angry, annoyed, frustrated, scared and anxious. Having feelings doesn't make you a negative person. It makes you human.



Lori Deschene



IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

1 in 5 women will experience a mental health condition. There are many factors that play a role in women's mental health.

Mental illness, while present in all genders, is experienced differently by everyone. In particular, women are more likely to experience mental health concerns than men are. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 1 in 5 women living in the United States suffer with a mental health condition. Women are more likely to be diagnosed with conditions, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), than men.

In addition, a woman's culture, race, and background can impact her mental health. Women of color are less likely to seek out mental health services than white women. Some cultures and backgrounds may discourage mental health services or look down on it.



Among other factors impacting women's mental health, menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause all play large roles. Many women worldwide are affected by premenstrual dysphoric disorder, post-partum depression, or perimenopausal depression during their lifetimes.

Another factor is victimization and discrimination. Historically, women have been targeted as victims of crime and have been treated unfairly by society.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The following include, but are not limited to, common signs and symptoms of a mental health condition:

- Intense feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty with mood regulation
- Avoiding triggers and places
- Fatigue or sleeping problems

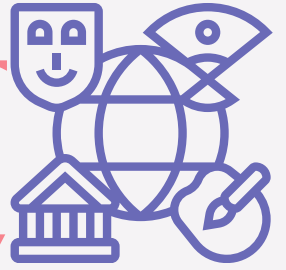


- Experiencing mania (really high highs and really low lows)
- Having auditory and visual hallucinations
- Suicidal ideation or attempts
- Engaging in self-harming behaviors
- Social withdrawal

Women struggling with their mental health may have a few of these symptoms occurring at the same time. These symptoms are often distressing and can interfere with one's daily life. It is important to address these signs and symptoms before they cause a disruption in your life and so that you can take care of your mental health.



FACTORS AT PLAY



Culture and Race

The term culture refers to the social norms, values, beliefs, and other ideas specific to a group of people. As the world is so diverse, each culture has a different outlook on women and mental health. In the United States, most people are pro-mental health and advocate for it. While this is true for many cultures, some still believe in the stigmas surrounding mental health.

Some cultures do not believe in mental health treatment and discourage others from seeking it out. Certain cultures may value strength, including mental strength, and see no point in therapy. Particularly for women, certain cultures may want them to be quiet and obedient. Seeking out mental health services are almost impossible for women in these cultures.

Race and cultural factors play a large role in the mental health of many women in minority communities. Kant and Sorkhou (2023) report that women of color seek mental health at a lesser rate than white women, at 5-10% versus 21.5%. Women of color and women in racial minority groups face a great deal of stigma and access barrier when it comes to seeking out mental health services.

Many women of color are hesitant to report their mental health concerns due to potential racism and stigma that some mental health professionals may have. As a result, these women have more severe symptoms of a mental health condition(s). This has led to a call to action in the mental health treatment community. Many practices have resources available for race-specific groups and can match someone to a therapist based on their ethnic background so ensure comfortability.

FACTORS AT PLAY



Pregnancy, Menstruation, and Menopause



Anxiety and depression can occur at elevated levels in women who are pregnant. Pregnancy can be an exciting and stressful time in a woman's life, so it is necessary to take all of the steps to ensuring good mental health. Many women who are pregnant and dealing with a mental health condition continue therapy, or seek it out, in addition to taking medication or discussing it with a psychiatrist or doctor. Another factor at play for pregnant women is postpartum depression (PPD). Postpartum depression is a mental health condition that occurs after delivering a baby that is characterized by intense feelings of sadness, worry, and fatigue. The March of Dimes reports that about 15% of women will be diagnosed with PPD. These symptoms can impact the level of care you can provide to your baby, so it is vital to have a support system to help you during this time in your life.

Menstruation can impact a woman's mood and lead to mood disorders. A number of women are affected by premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or premenstrual syndrome. The symptoms for these conditions are both mental and physical, including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, and more. In treating these conditions, antidepressants and other medications, relaxation techniques, and maintaining a good diet have been found to alleviate symptoms.

Check out this article and podcast by the APA on the menstrual cycle and mental health!





FACTORS AT PLAY

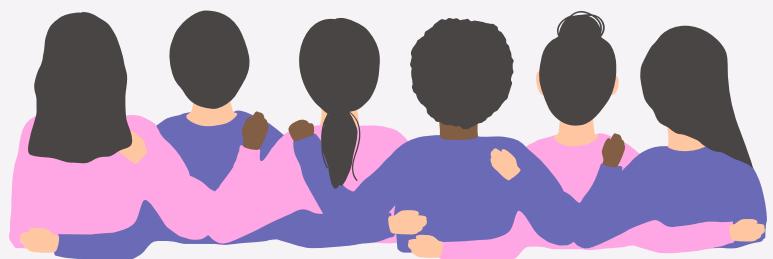
Pregnancy, Menstruation, and Menopause



Menopause is another significant factor in women's mental health. Increased levels of anxiety and depression can be affected by the changing levels of estrogen and progesterone in a woman's body, as well as the other ways in which the body is changing during menopause. The additional physical symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes or mood swings, may cause frustration and distress to the women coping with it. In women who already had a mood disorder, perimenopausal syndrome can take a harsher toll. Perimenopause is a natural part of life leading up to menopause. Women entering this phase of their lives also face body and self-esteem issues, depression, anxiety, and difficulties with memory and concentration.

As everyone's bodies and minds are different, menopause will affect women in different ways. In an article written by DeAngelis (2023), it is reported that some women have a more difficult experience with menopause, leading to harsher symptoms. Women who already had mental health conditions, are veterans, and were exposed to trauma are more likely to have more intense symptoms, which can impact their mental health. It is vital for women at this time in their lives to be open with their doctors and to practice self-care.

Check out DeAngelis's
2023 article here!



FACTORS AT PLAY

Victimization

Women have always been targeted as victims of crime. The most commonly discussed victimization women experience is sexual assault and rape. According to RAINN, 1 in 6 women have been a victim of rape or an attempted rape. These types of victimization can leave women with mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression.



Women who have been victims or survivors of sexual assault deal with many complications to their mental health. Hypervigilance, or constantly being on edge, is a common sign. Women may not feel safe anywhere and always feel like they are looking over their shoulder. Another common sign is panic attacks and flashbacks. These women may also struggle with interpersonal skills and maintaining relationships with friends and family.



Another factor at play is intimate partner violence (IPV), which can go hand-in-hand with sexual victimization. The NCADV states that 1 in 4 women will experience intimate partner violence. Women in abusive relationship may deal with stalking, rape, intimidation, coercion, and other crimes or tactics by their abuser. As many people overlook the harsh reality that sexual violence

can occur within relationships, many women do not report their victimization. It is vital to discuss consent and boundaries in any relationship, casual or romantic, to ensure each party feels safe and that their voice is heard.



COMMON CONDITIONS

Below are a number of mental health conditions that are more likely to present in women than men. In many of these conditions, women are 2x as likely to develop them than men. They include:

Depression

Depression is a mood disorder that is characterized by feelings of intense sadness and loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. Common symptoms include sadness, fatigue, and feelings of worthlessness. As reported by the Anxiety & Depression Association of America, 10.4% of women develop depression.

PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops following exposure to a traumatic event, such as domestic violence or terrorism. Its symptoms are characterized by hypervigilance, flashbacks, difficulty with mood regulation, and being easily startled. According to the National Center for PTSD, 8% of women will develop PTSD during their lifetime.

Anxiety

Anxiety disorder is when you have intense and persistent fear and concern about almost anything, like social situations. Common symptoms include constant worry, increased heart rate, and sleeping problems. Women are twice as likely as men to develop an anxiety disorder, as the ADAA reports about 23.4% women will suffer with anxiety.

Eating Disorders

There are many types of eating disorders, with the most common being anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Due to our society's unrealistic standards for beauty and weight, many women suffer from these eating disorders. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), the lifetime prevalence for eating disorders in women is 8.60%.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP



Rest assured knowing that there are many steps you can take when seeking out mental health treatment. Depending on what symptoms or conditions you need help treating, there are many different skilled mental health professionals available to help you on your mental health journey. There are even women-specific practitioners if you are more comfortable receiving treatment from a woman.

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, is a great way to address your mental health concerns and work through your problems with a counselor or therapist. There are multiple types of psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy, so it is important to meet with a couple different therapists to see which treatment best fits your needs. There are also therapists that specialize in areas, such as marriage counseling or addiction. Do not feel overwhelmed, as therapy is not a one-size fits all journey.

Group counseling or peer support groups are another great option. There are many organizations that offer group counseling or support groups where you can meet with other people who can relate to your experiences in addition to a facilitator(s). Many of these groups are peer-driven, so expect to have your fellow group members guide the conversations. Remember you are not alone, there are other people who have been in your shoes and know your pain.

If you are interested in trying medication to cope with your mental health condition, you should look into finding a psychiatrist who can meet your needs. A psychiatrist can prescribe you medication depending on your symptoms and can help you maintain your medications. While some practices vary, you should expect to meet with your psychiatrist weekly or biweekly. It's also worth noting that when you first seek out a psychiatrist, you will likely be put on a waitlist that could go over a month, so it's important to have coping skills and a support system to help you control your symptoms while you wait.

COPING SKILLS

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a form of meditation where you focus on being present in the moment. You bring your attention to the sensations in your body and allow yourself to feel them. You can practice mindfulness in many different ways, such as breathing techniques or guided meditations to reduce stress.

Words of Affirmation

Another great coping skill is words of affirmation. This skill allows you to say an affirming statement to yourself, such as “I am strong” over a period of time to promote a healthy mindset. You can do this in the morning or whenever works for your routine. You can even leave yourself notes with these affirmations.



Journaling

A popular coping skill is journaling. Journaling is a way to express your thoughts and feelings, whether it be with a pen and paper or on a device. Writing your feelings down can help alleviate your stress and promote mental well-being. You can journal whatever comes to your mind or follow guided prompts.

Self-Care

A coping skill that is often neglected is self-care. Self-care can be done in so many different ways, such as taking a social media break, practicing good skincare, or giving yourself time to relax. Self-care is done to relieve any stress or uncomfortable emotions you have in a healthy manner.

There are many great coping skills you can utilize. Always be sure to find healthy coping skills that are not damaging or destructive. Engaging in self-destructive behaviors can worsen the symptoms of a mental health condition.



RESOURCES FOR HELP!

The list below includes a number of mental health resources, both specific to women and in general.



Office on Women's Health (OASH)



Womanspace

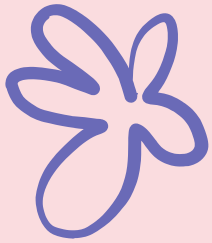


NAMI Mercer

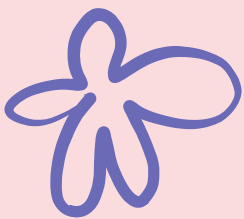
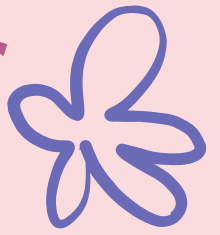


Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration





I am not afraid of
storms, for I am
learning how to
sail my ship.

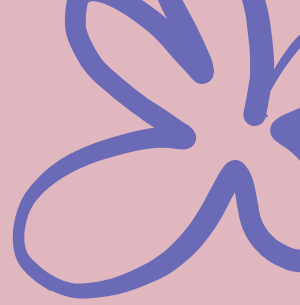


Louisa May Alcott



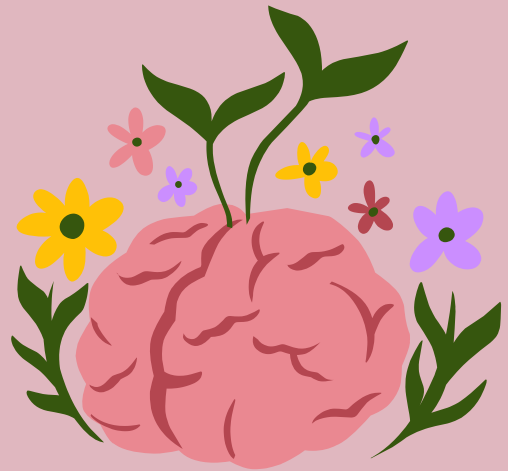
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Author's Note

Caitlin Golden



Taking care of our mental health is vital to our overall well-being. There is already so much stigma surrounding mental health, so it is important to break down those barriers and foster an accepting and compassionate perspective. As a woman who has faced mental health struggles, I find it necessary to advocate for myself and others, as well as educating those around me.



I graduated from Stockton University in December of 2023 with my Bachelor's degree. I majored in psychology with a concentration in forensic psychology with a minor in victimology and victim services. I will be attending The College of New Jersey in the fall of 2024 to earn my Master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. I previously interned at NAMI Mercer and wrote the toolkits *Dating Violence and Sexual Assault*, *A Guide to Complex PTSD*, and *Post-Graduation Depression*.



namimercer.org
609.799.8994

Helpline: 609.799.8994 x17

