

- o Endorphins can be manipulated by exercise, so taking a walk can be good if she feels able to leave the house. Going somewhere close for tea and cake can be nice.
- o Try to lay off the coffee - this is a total nerve poison at times like these.
- o Ditto sugar. Cravings may dictate otherwise, but sugar tends to make the head fizzier and the nerves more raw as it burns up and out. In general, what takes you high will throw you down.
- o Try essential oil of lime to counter cravings for coffee, cigarettes, sugar and other fast carbs, opium, ill-advised sexual liaisons, pretty much any seductive but destructive feel-good really.

Many men may feel put out by this inconvenient temporary insanity; that it is her problem and that he shouldn't have to do anything about it. Many men respond by trying to ignore the woman or trying to push her away or distance themselves. This can be very distressing for the woman.

Altruism aside, if that is not your strong suit, a little care and attention at the right time can save you a lot of grief.

What helps is for the man to gently remind the woman suffering from PMS that she seems to have PMS, and ask her if she is OK. She may just need to have a cry and a hug. If she is trying to pick a fight with you, you need to say that you don't want to fight and do your best to reassure her.

If she is relentless, point out that her behaviour is upsetting herself and you, and suggest some time out. It is better to say "I love you but you are scaring me and upsetting yourself" than "you are a psycho, I am out of here". Variations on "this is crazy talk and I don't have to listen to this drivel" or "get a grip" are tempting but ineffective and tend to escalate hysteria.

Experienced partners of women with PMS know how to tread the line between ignoring outbursts and feeding them by fully engaging. In the middle is a way of not saying very much but listening and trying to be reassuring, rather than necessarily engaging with the content of the outpouring. The idea is to calm her down, to reassure her that this will pass, not to help her reason her way back to sanity - this never works.

Also try to be aware that the severity of the bout of PMS may be entirely random, but also may present in direct proportion to how well the woman is travelling emotionally and psychologically. Fatigue or troubles seem to make PMS worse as they are telescoped by the hormonal storm. Therefore relationships are a trigger, and that involves you.

There is no point in being hard on her - remember, she hates herself more than you do at this time.

A suggestion about what might help could come next, such as can I run you a bath? Would you like to lie down and I could rub your feet or neck? I think you need to lie down and relax. Can I get you anything? (i.e. some of your vitamins and some chamomile tea etc.) The key is to try and help her relax. This may not be possible in toto but lessening the severity of the attack is the idea.

What you do is important. You can make this time better or worse for your friend. Your kindness will be reciprocated. Your neglect or abandonment will not strengthen your relationship; rather it may breed resentment and distrust.

Being philosophical to yourself may help. In other cultures the menses and the days prior are sometimes traditionally times of retreat; and the premenstrual period is valued as a highly creative time - sensitivities are heightened and defenses are down.

It is also thought to be a time when the psyche is dealing with unfinished business, and furthermore when psychic abilities are at the forefront. Some also think that at this time the chakras spin backwards and one is forced to face one's emotions and demons - good for mental hygiene in the long-run.

Perhaps try to think of women as kaitiaki of emotions - as another gross generalisation, women are more emotional creatures and are therefore quite an anathema to men. Try to think of it as a beautiful mystery, the balancing act of the sexes, that is.

No doubt, PMS also keeps women humble - and humility is something humanity could do with a lot more of.

It has endured evolution, so it must, in theory, have some important human function, so please try to ease this time rather than eradicate or resist it.

Women do not have an easy time in this patriarchal culture of ours. It may seem like an inconvenience or hard work to deal with, but perhaps you could think of it as an exchange for patriarchal privilege - or your kindness could just come as an expression of your sense of responsibility for your loved ones.

Ask yourself, if you were experiencing this terrible sense of dis-ease regularly (imagine if you were prone to something called "short-onset depression" or something like that), how would you like to be treated? Kindly and gently, for sure.

Understanding precedes forgiveness: a heads-up on Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) for boyfriends of women

As a man it can be baffling and extremely upsetting to find that the woman you love has changed before your very eyes into a strange, angry, disturbed, or crumpled version of herself. And yet to encounter this over and over again as if anew each time.

Men who have grown up in a household where a mother and/or sister/s suffered from PMS might already understand what is going on, but for the novice, it can be frustrating and confusing; and destructiveness may set in as anger escalates.

If your girlfriend seems to have what we might call "temporary insanity like clockwork" it is worth considering if she is a PMS sufferer. She may have already told you this, or she may not have articulated it, or, indeed, even understand it herself adequately.

What is important is that you, as a couple, identify if this is what is happening. Failure to do so may mean the end of your relationship.

Simply put, it is a hormonal head storm and there is no medication for it specifically. There is a huge drop in endorphins and serotonin in the PMS sufferer - it is basically a short intense depressive-anxiety bout. The woman's tide of the brain's feel-good chemicals has gone out.

In a word she feels like crap. And she cannot "snap out of it".

The duration of bouts of PMS vary from one day to as many as ten preceding the period. There may also be a day of PMS-like symptoms in the middle of the menstrual cycle around the time ovulation occurs.

One month may be more severe than another, and may vary in severity at different times in her life.

Symptoms include some, if not all, of the following:

tearfulness
anxiety
relentless head chatter
inability to let negative thoughts go
fearfulness, even terror
feelings of worthlessness, incapability
frowning, grimacing, wincing
spots
cleaning
irritability
destructiveness
suicidal ideation (it is quite common for women to find they get their period directly after a suicide attempt)
aggression
body aches, especially in the lower back and legs
picking fights
polishing old resentments
airing ancient insecurities
self-loathing
"clinginess"
emotional insecurity
paranoia
feelings of impending doom
panic attacks
cravings for carbohydrates
clumsiness
forgetfulness
increase in appetite for drugs and alcohol; benders may ensue, especially if the pre-menstrual period is in sync with the full moon (a surprisingly common situation)
confusion

This last symptom can manifest in a cruel inability to realise that what is happening is PMS. There is often a patent inability to plan for or even anticipate its onset even when periods are regular, and in recognising symptoms and to react with self-care and compassion.

Often the woman will think she is actually insane, and really despair for her future. Often too she will think that the reason she feels crazy and so distressed is attributable to an actual issue or event outside of herself.

Sometimes, actual events and concerns may be at the root of a melt-down. What PMS does, insidiously, is take an idea that under normal circumstances and brain chemistry is tolerable, and amplifies it into nightmare proportions.

There is also an apparent inability to remember what will help her in this situation. Your suggestions can be really helpful for this reason. So, what does help?

(NB. Topical treatment of PMS is a very ad hoc thing. The medical profession still has rather a dim view of PMS as some sort of phenomenon of the neurotic weak, or dramatic woman-type. Do not be fooled, it is a legitimate biochemical condition.)

The following have proved to ease symptoms:

- o Herbal sedatives and vitamin nerve tonics such as chamomile (in tea or concentrated form), Siberian ginseng, valerian, passionflower, etc. Herbal mixtures may be obtained from naturopaths. These will often include kava, and you must be aware that this can be physically addictive in the same manner as valium. An excellent over-the-counter tablet preparation is Counterstress - this contains herbs and vitamins and is as close to a silver bullet as you can get. Perhaps it is the Siberian ginseng - this works on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis of the central nervous system which when depleted causes nervous distress, insomnia, sore muscles, and an inability to deal with stress. Sound familiar?
- o Vitamin C and B group vitamins are great stress relievers. Magnesium is also effective as a muscle relaxant and mild sedative.
- o One herb that is shown to counteract PMS over time is Vitex Agnus, or chaste tree as it is also known. Evening Primrose oil too can assist. These are effective after a few weeks of ingestion.
- o Rescue remedy and other homeopathic remedies can be effective. Also try bachflowers remedies for specific emotional distress symptoms (there will often regular themes to her despair).
- o NB. Do not be tempted to offer, enable or encourage the use of heavier medication, as these can have bad follow-on effects for the brain chemistry. These include opiates, alcohol, prescription tranquillisers, sedatives and marijuana (which can be especially addling - try to avoid all agents of paranoia). PMS feels like a drug comedown at the best of times, so imagine what experiencing it feels like when you are also on a comedown or the half-life of a drug. Or, for that matter, having to prolong the whole experience beyond when it would normally have been relieved by the blessed hormonal shift.
- o Essential oils such as lavender and geranium can have immediate effect, especially at night - these are the most effective oils for anxiety and insomnia. Rose, chamomile, neroli, and clary sage can be very comforting. Inhalation is preferable to skin application as sometimes irritation can occur.

- o Drinking water has a calming effect on the nerves, as does immersion in it. A swim in the sea is very restoring and grounding, as is standing out in the rain, or having a bath. The addition of bathsalts has the effect of making the bath into an orgone accumulator which is most mood-altering. Saunas too can really shift things sideways.
- o Massage is very soothing, as are reassurance, kindness, love, compassion, positive ideas, listening, comfort, initiating relaxing activities, affection.
- o Talking is a great way for women to release emotions. It really helps too to call a woman friend or family member if she needs to let off steam. Remember that women tend to release stress by talking, as a gross generalisation.
- o Relaxation, when things are getting serious, requires actively doing things that are relaxing (paradoxical, perhaps, but it is a fact). Meditation is such a form of relaxing on purpose, and it effectively breaks the cyclical washing around of persistent negative thoughts.
- o Automatic writing can be a great release from upsetting thoughts.
- o Solitude can really help, but it should be self-initiated me-time rather than just being rejected by loved ones and left to fend for oneself.
- o Try to keep her away from people who wind her up. If her family/circle of friends/workplace is dysfunctional, screen calls. It is useful to think of mental health as a garden that will flourish when the right things are added and done. It can wither when neglected, or easily become overrun with weeds. Or the things can be planted in inappropriate places and not survive.
- o Doing something fun and easy with a friend can really help too such as a dvd or a game of cards - something like 'last card' can be a good way of acting out aggression without rancour.
- o Try to encourage her to stop trying to do things. Sometimes people try to beat anxiety by running faster than it and by getting everything in order. I am sure there is an appropriate Greek myth about this sort of exercise in futility - who was it that was rolling a ball uphill? And who was it that was cleaning the Phrygian stables? Starting at one end and having to go back to the beginning and start again over and over...
- o Participating in housecleaning can be nice gesture of goodwill - joining in on another's obsessive bender is also quite comic and jokes can really puncture terror and gloom.