

A LINE ON LIFE

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Myths of Menstruation *

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Menstruation has fascinated and frightened people since the dawn of time. This is reflected in the myths of various cultures. What are these myths? Why did they develop? Why do some people still believe in them?

In ancient Rome, Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* that bees left hives, mares miscarried and corn in the field withered at the touch of a menstruating woman. Australian aborigines told boys that, if they set their eyes on menstrual blood, their hair would turn gray and their vigor would be lost. Only a few decades ago in Europe, they believed that menstruating women could turn wine to vinegar and, if involved in the brewing of beer, would spoil the product. Some religions consider menstruating women to be unclean and impure.

There is no scientific basis for attributing malevolent (bad) magical effects to menstruation. Food and drink are *not* spoiled by menstruating women. Menstruating women do not repel bees or gray the hair of onlooking boys. If so, why has menstruation been regarded so negatively? There seem to be several reasons.

First, menstruation was a very mysterious process to ancient peoples. From their viewpoint, bleeding was associated with wounds and death. Yet when women bled from their genitals — they did not die. This mysterious phenomenon led to a reaction of wonder and fear.

Second, menstruation was viewed as a form of purification involving the elimination of extra blood and body wastes. Thus, the menstruating woman was seen as "*unclean*." Actually there is nothing particularly unsanitary about the menstrual flow. Even so, the view of the menstrual flow being unclean remains with us today. Even the terminology — "*sanitary napkins*" — and content of menstrual hygiene advertisements emphasize achieving cleanliness.

Menstruation is also **shrouded in secrecy**. There is still a taboo against indicating in any way — outside of an all-female group — that one is menstruating. For example, if a menstruating woman does not want to go swimming, she will use other excuses to avoid mentioning her menstrual period. Perhaps one reason for the secrecy is that the bloodiness of menstruation reminds people of birth and death — topics that many people try to avoid. Menstruation is often dealt with by using small, rarely seen, tampons. Any blood is carefully and quickly washed away. We keep menstruation hidden, shielding ourselves from the awesome reminders of the power of birth and death.

In the early 1980s, **Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)** — a very serious infection due to the use of high-absorbency tampons — led to some reduction in the secrecy surrounding menstruation. For a while, menstruation was talked about on the front pages of newspapers. Even though the publicity reduced some of the secrecy taboos of menstruation, it has also reinforced the old myths of menstruation as being dangerous.

In the United States, public attitudes still reflect these myths. In a 1981 survey of over 100 Americans, over 50% thought that women were more emotional while menstruating, and about 25% believed that women cannot function normally or do their work as well during their menstrual periods. Not surprisingly, more men (34%) than women (19%) expressed these beliefs.

To investigate these beliefs, some studies were done that involve task performance during the whole menstrual cycle. No evidence of premenstrual or menstrual decline was found in such mental skills as learning, thinking or judgment — nor were there consistent effects on physical performance. There may be

individual exceptions. However, in studies of random samples of women, no consistent changes were found over the course of the menstrual cycle.

Although hormonal changes in some women might have some negative effects, other factors might contribute to women's emotional responses to **menstruation**. In some, the physical pain and discomfort of menstrual cramping can lead to psychological symptoms of anxiety and depression. To add to this, cultural expectations increase psychological menstrual symptoms. In other words, the more a woman expects to be upset at "*that time of month*," the more likely she will actually be upset.

Menstrual or premenstrual symptoms might be severe enough to effect the functioning of a few women. In more women — although they might suffer some discomfort — they probably will be able to function well both behaviorally and psychologically. Similarly, all of us — men and women — have "*off days*." Usually we function well, even though we may feel a little "*off*." Are we to be judged in proficiency by our typical days or by our "*off*" days? It seems like women as a whole are judged by the "*off days*" that only occur in some women.

In contrast to our technological advances, with our attitudes and myths, we are only a few steps out of the caves.

Our current myths often seem to be the old myths in new clothes. From a psychological viewpoint, one interesting question is, "*Why do these myths persist — even in the absence of confirming evidence?*" In other words, what purposes do they serve? Perhaps they allow us to maintain the old stereotypes of the sexes — men as rational, women as emotional. They may serve to justify excluding women from positions of power and influence. These myths promote the subordination of women "*for their own good*."

Perhaps we are not as free from old fears as we think. Our technology has helped us to advance greatly. On the other hand, in terms of some of our attitudes and myths, we are only a few steps out of the cave.

* Adapted from Zick Rubin and Elton McNeil's *Psychology: Being Human*, Harper and Row, 1987, pages 94-97.