



Rates of depression and anxiety in women are roughly twice the rate in men. Researchers have identified many social, biological, and cultural variables that appear to influence these statistics. The emerging field of reproductive psychiatry focuses on the role of hormones in the mental health of women. Although 87 hormones have been identified in women, three types of estrogen (estradiol, estrone, and estriol) have been the most widely studied hormones to date.

The effect of hormones on mental health gained attention when scientific studies indicated a pattern between the frequency of psychiatric complaints among women and the timing of their reproductive events (menstrual onset, pregnancy, postpartum experience, surgical menopause following hysterectomy, and naturally occurring perimenopause/ menopause). During these reproductive events, hormone levels are known to fluctuate significantly in women. Estrogen levels, for example, seem to decrease during some of these events.

In addition to physical symptoms, decreased estrogen has also been found to influence sadness or irritability. Research found that estrogen, like other hormones, has receptors throughout the brain that communicate with neurotransmitters—this means that estrogen levels can dramatically affect mood. Estrogen boosts serotonin (a biochemical that improves mood) by making more of it, and then by maintaining serotonin levels in the brain.

When estrogen levels decrease (during events such as menopause) serotonin levels also drop, which leads to a depressed mood.

Simply adding estrogen can be tricky, however, as too much estrogen can affect other biochemicals in the brain which can also lead to depressed mood or anxiety. Researchers in reproductive psychiatry are now hoping to identify the optimal balance of estrogen levels in a woman's brain.

Following are some current treatments and practices:

Hormonal treatment: For menstruating women, some birth control pills offer hormone treatment to improve mood. For women in menopause, the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been recently found to improve mood and cognition. Recent results from large, prospective studies, however, have questioned the safety of long-term use of HRT.

Psychiatric medications: Talk to your physician about psychiatric medications that might help with the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Increased nutritional supplements:

Some studies suggest the following supplements for postpartum women: Calcium 600 mg bid, the RDA recommended dosage of Zinc, Omega 3s/6s (flax seed-based only if breastfeeding), and a stress formula multivitamin. Menstruating women might find Calcium 600 mg twice per day, Vitamin B-6 50-100 mg a day, Magnesium 200-360 mg a day, and Vitamin E 400 IU a day helpful. Talk to your physician before beginning any new vitamins.

Eliminating aspartame: Aspartame, an artificial sweetener found in Equal and many diet sodas, appears to interfere with serotonin production, thereby worsening mood.

Decreasing or eliminating the intake of caffeine, sugar, alcohol, nicotine, and sodium: Making these lifestyle changes has also been empirically found to improve mood.

Ensuring adequate sleep and regular aerobic exercise: Quality sleep and exercise affect biochemistry and have been scientifically found to boost mood.

Herbal remedies: One recent double-blind, placebo-controlled trial concluded that chasteberry significantly decreased premenstrual symptoms of irritability, anger, headache and breast fullness when compared to placebo. Always check with your physician before using herbal remedies.

For women with mild-moderate depressed mood or anxiety, nutritional supplements and lifestyle changes might be the best place to start. For women with moderate-severe depressed mood or anxiety, however, medications might be the necessary, initial form of treatment.



Dr. Lisson is a licensed clinical psychologist in the states of North Carolina and Florida and is fellowship-trained in health psychology. Her expertise includes working with patients who experience stress related to their medical problems, promoting better medical compliance and health care behavior, and evaluating patients for surgical risk and readiness. To learn more about Dr. Lisson and her solo, private practice at the Center for Health Solutions, PLLC, please visit her website at www.gaillisson.com.