

Menstruations

This document is a slightly revised version of the **thematic grid “Menstruation”**, developed by the **Réseau Québécois d'Action pour la Santé des Femmes (RQASF)** with the collaboration of Carole Tatlock in May 2000, it was made at a time when this subject was little covered.

Twenty years later, **the taboo surrounding menstruation is still very present in our society**, this tool is still very useful in **allowing young girls and women to encounter the dominant discourse and to claim their cycle positively.**

Even though menstruation is a natural phenomenon, it has been associated, across cultures and centuries, with various taboos, shame and a lot of misinformation. This negative view of menstruation is strongly integrated into the daily life of women and is part of popular culture.

Taking the example of advertising content referring to menstruation: the main focus remains on themes such as femininity, freshness, discretion and, more recently, freedom of action. The message they convey can be summed up as follows: **periods should be hidden, if possible, denied.** And when some advertisers try to keep up with the times by portraying the vulva or blood, they face an outraged outcry, as was the case in France and Australia last year.

Women have called for recognition of the existence of premenstrual manifestations among them. The medical establishment responded to this request by making it a pathological interpretation, therefore a disease. Hence the expression "P.M.S" (Premenstrual syndrome), widely disseminated in popular literature since 1980.

According to this vision, the "P.M.S" Affects all women, while each woman has her own positive or negative way of experiencing her PMS. For example, references to "P.M.S" to justify the anger or irritation expressed by a woman is often used in our daily conversations. All humans, men and women, experience different mood swings over the course of the month. **A cultural bias ensures that we link these variations to the menstrual cycle in all women. We have to realize that when we tell a woman that she is angry about her "P.M.S ", we may be wrong.** Such a misplaced remark is equivalent to invalidate what a woman is going through and silencing her.

The medical world and feminists have, alternately, analyzed the menstrual cycle in order to propose ways to cope with the changes which are manifested in the body of women. Their visions, their respective speeches have impacted women's health; this is what this document seeks to demonstrate.



Dominant Speech

PERPETUATE the idea that hormonal changes in the menstrual cycle make women sick or unbearable.

APPLY the diagnosis of premenstrual and menstrual discomfort to all women.

PRESENT the first menstruation as the beginning of a period "at risk" for young girls: risk of pregnancy, risk of premenstrual and menstrual discomfort.

Solutions

DEFINE "symptoms" as a disease, that is, "P.M.S.". "The" P.M.S" can be found in the Mental Disorders Directory, a reference book on psychiatry, widely used by health professionals.

ELIMINATE the manifestations of the cycle, make the menstruation disappear.

CONTROL discomfort, regulate the menstrual cycle and reduce the risk of teenage pregnancy.




Techniques

ASSOCIATE up to 150 "symptoms" experienced by women with "P.M.S" (Eg: depression, eating disorder, loss of control).

MEDICALIZE a natural phenomenon by trying to reduce its "symptoms" with hormonal contraceptives, hormone therapy, surgery, antidepressants, painkillers or anti-inflammatories, etc.

ENCOURAGE teenage use of hormonal contraceptives such as Depo-Provera injection, Norplant implant or oral contraceptives.

Impacts

-  **DIVERTING** women's attention from other causes of some of their problems
-  **DEMANDING** from women a constant mood and flawless social performance
-  **UNDERMINE** the ability of adolescent girls to know how their bodies work and respond



Feminist Response

RESTORE the menstrual cycle in a woman's life knowing that it does not define them as a person, does not control them, and is not a determining factor in their personality.

LEARN about the physiological process of the menstrual cycle.

DESTROY taboos, deconstruct negative cultural elements related to menstruation.

Solutions

DEMYSTIFY the menstrual cycle by challenging the idea that hormones are the only cause of the various symptoms that women experience.

DEVELOP a greater listening to oneself.

DISCOVER positive expressions of premenstrual and menstrual phases.

Impacts

- ✓ **ACQUIRE** better self-esteem and a positive image of the menstrual cycle and your body
- ✓ **PARTICIPATE** actively in decision-making that affects their health and adopt preventive attitudes
- ✓ **TRANSMIT** a positive vision of the menstrual cycle and highlight the start of periods for young girls

Techniques

UNDERSTAND that changes occur in women's bodies throughout the menstrual cycle and that this cycle also changes through life.

LEARN to know the menstrual cycle, recognize its manifestations and record them.

NAME pleasurable manifestations of the cycle such as increased energy, creativity, assertiveness, receptivity or sexual pleasure.

Conclusion

... RE-OWN THE HISTORY OF YOUR MENSTRUATIONS, OUTSIDE OF TABOOS AND WRONG INFORMATION!

The menstrual cycle has positive and negative manifestations; the degree of intensity of these manifestations varies among women, of whom only 5 to 10% experience severe physical and psychological discomfort to the point that their daily lives are greatly affected. **Menstrual cycle manifestations such as overwhelming energy and creativity are often overlooked because they do not correspond to the idea we usually have.**

The various swirls of the menstrual cycle are normal, they are the result of the combined action of various biological, psychological and environmental factors. For example, during the menstrual cycle, body temperature, quality of sleep, appetite, consistency and amount of cervical mucus (mucus secreted from the cervix) varies.

Many events experienced by women are associated with the "P.M.S", everything goes there: acne, anxiety, fatigue, eating disorders, dizziness, irregular heartbeats, etc. It is a question of not relating all these discomforts to "P.M.S"; other causes may explain them. Wouldn't these manifestations be the expression of feelings not expressed or repressed and more generally of the way of life of women?

In this way, **a positive and holistic view of the phenomenon of menstruation can emerge.** This vision allows women to **embark on a process of demystifying information about menstruation and developing better self-esteem.**

To convey a positive view of menstruation, it would be appropriate to draw inspiration from certain communities which traditionally celebrated the first menstruation among young girls. For example, on this occasion, the Apaches performed the Rising Sun dance.



We could appeal to our imagination to adapt these rites to current and Quebec realities, so that young girls apprehend this natural change in a positive and uninhibited manner!

References

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This tool is produced as part of the Red Campaign #LaVieEnRouge, initiated by the **Réseau Québécois d'Action pour la Santé des Femmes**. The objectives of this awareness campaign are:

- Valuing the rules for a healthy body image and better self-esteem
- Reduce sexual and gender stereotypes
- Contribute to a more equitable society by promoting women's access to menstrual hygiene products
- Work for a transformation of medical practices and a reduction in the medicalization of female physiological cycles
- Support women's autonomy and empowerment, promoting free and enlightened choices regarding their health

For more information and to support our action: www.rqasf.qc.ca/campagnerouge