Research reveals understanding PMS can reduce women’s distress

Women can significantly improve ‘that time of the month,’ by learning more about how premenstrual symptoms (PMS) can affect their minds and bodies and by adopting stress management and relaxation techniques.

Leading women’s health researchers, Professor Jane Ussher and Dr Janette Perz from the University of Western Sydney, have conducted a study of the effectiveness of psychological interventions for PMS.

The findings reveal that both one-to-one and self-help therapies can improve women’s overall experience of PMS, as well as ameliorate PMS symptoms.

“PMS is a major health problem which causes significant psychological changes such as stress, depression, and an inability to function socially,” says Professor Ussher from the UWS School of Psychology.

“By understanding how their bodies work, as well as the patterns of their thoughts and feelings, women can learn to cope better with PMS – which can, in turn, lead to a reduction in their psychological symptoms.”

As part of the UWS study, women between the ages of 20 and 45 were issued with PMS self-help information packages or recruited to participate in specialist three-month psychological treatment programs.

The self-help packs and treatment sessions gave each participant the opportunity to explore the psychological symptoms of PMS, as well as learn effective problem-solving, relaxation and stress management techniques.

According to Professor Ussher, the outcomes of the study indicate that psychological treatments can have a gradual and lasting impact on PMS.

“The psychological treatments aimed to change the women’s patterns of thinking and coping, which acted to reposition PMS as something they could deal with,” says Professor Ussher.

“For many of the study participants, this led to a significant reduction in their feelings of depression, guilt and anxiety and, although the physical symptoms of PMS were still present, these were of a lesser magnitude and were no longer distressing.”

Professor Ussher says there is long-held perception that the ideal woman is calm, caring and always able to cope, which puts everyday women under great pressure to be perfect and competent all the time.

“The therapy sessions and self-help packs were designed to challenge the perceptions of how women ‘should’ be, and tell women that they should not feel guilty about their body’s normal responses premenstrually,” she says.
“For most women, there is no need to rely on medications. Premenstrual symptoms can be effectively and satisfactorily treated with lifestyle changes, cognitive behaviour therapy, exercise and dietary regulation – all women need is sufficient access to psychological services or the opportunity to learn the skills that are necessary to self-treat their symptoms.”

The research also revealed that partners play a key role in helping women cope with premenstrual symptoms. “Women whose partners were accepting and supportive were more able to engage in self-care, whilst women whose partners were unsupportive were more likely to experience guilt and self-blame.”

“Unfortunately, for women who do not have support and understanding at home, ‘that time of the month’ can often lead to ongoing feuds and tensions, which in turn can cause PMS to worsen,” Says Professor Ussher.

To help break this damaging cycle, Professor Ussher and Dr Perz are carrying out a new study, which includes partners in treatments for PMS. The aim of the specialist treatment program is to teach couples skills to better understand and support each other, and help women to cope with the overall experience of PMS.

The PMS couples therapy sessions will take place over 3 months. The effectiveness of the sessions will be assessed by comparing the outcomes for each couple with the outcomes of women participating in individual and self-help treatment programs.

The research project is supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC), and is being conducted in partnership with Family Planning New South Wales.

For more information or to participate in the study, contact the study co-ordinator, Yasmin Hawkins on pms@uws.edu.au or (02) 9772 6476.