



How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Lexapro

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I learned many valuable lessons in school, like how to throw a broad-brimmed hat over the school chapel, how many centimetres a shapeless dress should fall below the knee, and that mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell. It was a well-rounded education that prepared me to take on the world, but there was one important nugget of knowledge that my teachers failed to impart: the havoc the menstrual cycle can wreak on your mind and body.

Sure, we learned the basics – our uterine lining sheds every month for about five to seven days to indicate that the egg hasn't been fertilised; the importance of carrying pads or tampons in case our period arrived at school; that mild cramping is totally normal and... that was about it. There was no discussion of how the menstrual cycle can affect our moods, digestion or skin. Hell, I don't even remember learning about endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome—two of the more common menstrual-related conditions.

This educational gap meant that I, and many of my friends, failed to understand the inner workings of our bodies and were left struggling, without help or diagnosis, until our mid-to-late twenties.

For me, this bodily ignorance showed up as a complete inability to perform simple pattern recognition. Every few weeks, I'd go through bouts of insomnia, heightened anxiety, and an overwhelming urge to dramatically change something in my life—my job, my relationship, my hair—with no idea why. Then, after a week of worrying that I was doomed to feel this way forever, my period would arrive and solve the mystery. Until the next month, when everything went off the rails again.

When I finally decided to see a psychologist, she introduced me to a condition called PMDD, or premenstrual dysphoric disorder. PMDD, she explained, is a severe form of PMS that causes psychological distress and is triggered by the hormonal changes in the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle (i.e., the dreaded week before your period). I was delighted to learn that:

**a) what I had been experiencing had a name and
b) I wasn't crazy.**

I was less delighted to learn that one of the few ways to reliably treat the condition was by taking hormonal birth control or antidepressants.

I had recently stopped taking the pill after four years to curb the frequent migraines it caused, and was just starting to get my cycle back on track. The idea of returning to hormonal birth control didn't sit right with me, and neither did taking antidepressants. Years of TV consumption and tales from friends had left me with the impression that SSRIs left you sleepy, numb, and—horror of horrors—could even make you gain weight. My fear and vanity made me sit on my PMDD diagnosis and Lexapro prescription for another two years. Then I got engaged.

Things were fine for the first year of planning, but started to unravel as the day loomed closer. I would be okay for most of the month, but when the luteal phase hit, a simple question about why a particular

cousin wasn't invited to the wedding would send me spiralling. My mind felt panicked and out of control, while my body was heavy, sore and exhausted. I checked my period tracking app and saw that the wedding would fall the week before my August period, so I decided it was time to bite the bullet and pick up a pack of Lexapro.

And then, the strangest thing happened: I started to feel better. After the initial side effects subsided, I was amazed by how normal and calm I felt each day. It was as though the frequency had been turned down in my brain, a feeling which continued well into my luteal phase. Everything about me stayed the same; I was just able to continue to be a person for more than two weeks at a time.

Antidepressants have been a lifesaver for me this year, but I was frustrated by the lack of options provided by my GP. Like many women's health issues, PMDD is significantly under-researched, leaving women with treatment options that serve as more of a band-aid to mask the symptoms rather than resolve the underlying problems.

So what's the solution? For me, it was working with a naturopath. I was initially sceptical, having previously gone to a naturopath who tried to get me to buy \$300 worth of supplements based on the pattern of my irises (yes, really). Luckily, my new naturopath is wonderful and has provided me with a treatment plan that addresses multiple lifestyle factors, including my diet, sleep and stress management, that contribute to my PMDD symptoms.

Cut to a few months later, when my husband and I were on our honeymoon. We arrived in New Zealand, excited for a two-week trip across the South Island, only to discover that neither of us had packed a physical debit card. Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been an issue but in this case it meant we couldn't collect the rental car we had booked months earlier. Coincidentally, the first week of the honeymoon fell in my luteal phase—which, pre-Lexapro, would have sent me into a tailspin of stress, self-flagellation, and undeserved ire at my partner. But thanks to this neurochemical miracle, I was able to breathe, enjoy a delicious meal with my new spouse, and calmly find a solution the next day. I wasn't overstimulated by airport chaos or the freezing Christchurch air; I could see the situation for what it was: a very minor, very surmountable bump in the road.

Everyone's approach to treatment will be different, and the most important thing is to find what works for you. But if I can impart a few parting words of wisdom, **don't wait two years to seek treatment, and don't do anything dramatic to your hair during your luteal phase.**

