

Issue At A Glance:

Women's Mental Health

Mental health disorders impact men and women differently, and there is an increasing prevalence of mental health illnesses among women. This issue brief provides an overview of the gender gap in mental health, the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health, and the various factors impacting women's mental health.

Introduction

Mental health illnesses among women are on the rise.¹ May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a time to raise awareness about the significance of mental health and well-being in the lives of Americans and to commemorate the journey of recovery from mental illness.² Additionally, National Women's Health Week is celebrated in May annually, starting on Mother's Day, with the aim of urging women and girls to prioritize their health.³ It is crucial for women to prioritize both their physical and mental health, as various factors contribute to the distinct challenges they face.

Mental illness affects individuals of all genders, with unique challenges for women tied to hormonal changes, such as perinatal depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, and perimenopause-related depression.^{4,5} However, many mental health disparities between men and women are socially constructed and are often linked to roles, responsibilities, and power dynamics rather than biological factors.^{6,7}

This issue brief provides an overview of the gender gap in mental health, the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health, and the various factors impacting women's mental health.

Women's Mental Health Statistics¹

- 19%** Of women experience a common mental disorder, such as anxiety or depression.
- 53%** Of women who have mental illnesses have experienced abuse.
- 29%** Of women in poverty experience a common mental disorder.
- 25.7%** Of young women aged 24 and younger have self-harmed.
- 26%** Of young women aged 24 and younger experience common mental disorders.

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Gender Disparities in Mental Health Illnesses

Numerous studies have shown differences between men and women concerning the risk, frequency, manifestation, progression, and treatment of mental illnesses.⁶

Rates of mental health conditions

Annually, one out of five every woman in the United States experiences a mental health issue, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or an eating disorder, compared to one in eight men.^{6,8} This is because negative social and economic factors can expose women to a higher risk of experiencing poor mental health than men.^{9,10}

Depression and anxiety

Depression is a multifaceted condition with no singular cause.¹¹ Women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression, which can be due to biological differences as well as cultural expectations, gender roles, and potential underdiagnosis among men.^{6,11,12}

Similarly, women are twice as likely to experience generalized anxiety disorder or panic disorder

compared to men.^{6,13} This can be due to the fact that testosterone, present in greater quantities in men, has been identified as having anti-depressant and anti-anxiety benefits.¹³

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Many individuals exposed to violent conflicts, displacement, and natural disasters are women and children.¹³ Therefore, women are twice as likely as men to experience PTSD.^{6,13} This heightened risk is linked to a range of traumatic experiences, including domestic violence and sexual abuse.¹³

Eating disorders

Approximately 95% of people diagnosed with anorexia nervosa or bulimia and 65% of people with a binge eating disorder are women.⁶ Often, eating disorders involve obsessive thoughts and behaviors related to food, body weight, and appearance due to societal pressures related to body image, cultural expectations, and gender norms.¹³

Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health

Mental health issues during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum period, such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorder, are significant concerns that impact one out of every five women.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that postpartum depression affects one in eight women, with half of these cases going untreated.^{14,15} The Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM) is a nationwide collaborative initiative aimed at supporting best practices to enhance the safety of childbirth, improve outcomes in maternal health, and save lives through identifying, developing, implementing, and disseminating information on safety measures.^{16,17}



Factors Impacting Women's Mental Health

Societal expectations

More than two-thirds of primary caregivers are women, providing care for partners, parents, and children. Pressures related to societal norms, gender roles, and expectations may contribute to stress, such as managing the paid and unpaid work responsibilities, as well as financial security and independence.¹⁸ Balancing caregiving roles, whether for children, aging parents, or other family members, can also be emotionally taxing.¹⁹ Furthermore, the influence of social media on body image and weight perceptions have disproportionately impacted women, leading to disordered eating and eating disorders.^{13,20}

Work-life balance

Maintaining a work-life balance is crucial for overall wellbeing, impacting physical, mental, and emotional health.²¹ Many women face the challenge of managing both work and family responsibilities, leading to notable stress and anxiety. Research has shown that 56% of working mothers find it challenging to balance the responsibilities. The difficulties of balancing work and family can adversely affect women's career progression and mental well-being, leading to stress, burnout, and other mental health issues.²²

Reproductive health issues

Infertility and miscarriage are common experiences that impact many individuals. Approximately one in six couples face infertility, while as many as one in four identified pregnancies end in a miscarriage. Furthermore,

stillbirth or newborn death occurs in one in every 100 births. These losses significantly affect the emotional and mental well-being of women, especially those who have a desire to be mothers.¹⁸ Moreover, conditions like polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, and other fertility challenges can be additional sources of stress.²³

Furthermore, it is common for women to experience depression and anxiety during pregnancy and postpartum period.

Approximately one in ten women experience depression during pregnancy, and one in six women face depression in the first year after giving birth. Anxiety is equally prevalent, often occurring simultaneously.¹⁸

Hormonal changes

Reproductive hormones, such as estrogen, testosterone, and progesterone, can have a large impact on mental health.²⁴ Women undergoing abrupt hormonal changes, whether during perimenopause, puberty, postpartum period, or their monthly cycle, face an elevated risk of anxiety and depression.²⁵ Menopause itself can heighten the risk of mental health issues due to hormonal changes during perimenopause, leading to mood swings, irritability, depression, and anxiety. Physical challenges, such as hot flashes, night sweats, disrupted sleep, and weight gain, further contribute to mental health concerns.¹⁸ Additionally, decreasing estrogen and progesterone levels can trigger mood swings and depressive episodes.²⁵

Mental Health Resources for Women

Although mental health care has grown across the nation, there is still work to be done when examining gender disparities in mental health.¹³ Below are resources for those who may be struggling with mental health issues.

- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988 to speak with a trained crisis counselor in English or Spanish.
 - Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24/7.^{26,27}
- **National Maternal Mental Health Hotline:** Call or text 1-833-852-6262 to connect with counselors in English or Spanish.
 - Provides free and confidential mental health support for moms and their families before, during, and after pregnancy.²⁸
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** Call 1-800-656-4763 to get connected with a trained sexual assault service provider.
 - Provides free and confidential support from a trained staff member to help victims of sexual assault.²⁹

References

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Did you know?

Approximately one-third of women have encountered sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking from an intimate partner at some point in their lives.⁶



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
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Institute for Health Policy and Leadership

11209 Anderson Street
Loma Linda, CA 92354
Phone: 909-558-7022
Fax: 909-558-5638
www.IHPL.llu.edu

Questions?

Please contact Renée Chuang, MS,
Doctoral Graduate Assistant at the
Institute for Health Policy & Leadership
(RChuang@llu.edu).