

ELLE, OCTOBER 2001

# I Want My PMS

Once a month you suffer. Now you can medicate those physical and psychological pains away—but at what personal cost? Gayle Forman reports on the highs of feeling low.

My first inkling that it's coming is a fluttering in my abdomen, little wings thumping against the walls of my insides. Somehow, I'm surprised by the feeling, though it happens every month. Then it intensifies: a fist in my stomach, a turmoil in my body, or a sense of doom.

Only when the tears come at seeing an old man struggle onto a bus, at catching thirty cornball seconds of *Touched by an Angel*, do I realize that my blues are the result of PMS, the condition that affects up to 75 percent of menstruating women with a range of maladies, from bloating to fatigue to insomnia to anger to despondency.

As ubiquitous as PMS may be, it's a scientific mystery. Doctors and researchers know that fluctuating levels of reproductive hormones trigger changes in neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, which regulates mood, among other things. But scientists still aren't clear as to why one woman's sore breasts are another woman's wrath. Of those who get PMS, between a quarter and a half (depending on which study you believe) experience extreme symptoms, which medical literature vaguely defines as those that "disrupt daily life."

Is my case severe? PMS definitely drops my life with a thud, but it doesn't inflame me with fury

or paralyze me with nausea, as it does some women. Mostly it makes me melancholy and raw. And that rawness is precisely why I cherish my PMS days. Other people take weekly trips to the therapist's couch to dredge up buried unhappiness and dissatisfaction. I don't need to dig. PMS throws my emotions right in my face. Earlier this year, I lost four friends in a car accident. The grief was explosive, but I dealt with this inconceivable tragedy by making plans, organizing wakes—being in my head instead of in my heart. After the funeral, I obsessed about the crash, replaying it in my mind, but I was unable to digest what had happened and unable to really grieve.

Then my hormones kicked in, and one night while I was reading a magazine alone in my apartment, I heard a siren. For two hours, I sobbed, screamed, threw pillows, and kicked furniture. Later, I felt horrible, yet relieved. PMS has become a monthly catalyst for my catharsis; each time the tsunami passes, I am more at peace. Of course, not everyone relishes her lunar lunacy. And in the latest offensive against excessive emotion, pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly has remarketed Prozac to fight mood swings and testiness. The wonder drug, rechristened with the soft-focus-sounding "Sarafem," is now an FDA-approved treatment for PMDD, or premenstrual dysphoric

disorder. PMDD is the clinical twin of PMS, except that the former is an actual psychiatric diagnosis- its existence codified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - and its psychological symptoms are more severe. Instead of the blues, women might suffer depression or contemplate suicide; instead of crankiness, they could experience dizzying mood swings or out-of-nowhere rages. As with many psychiatric syndromes, however, there is no line clearly demarcating where an extreme case of PMS graduates to PMDD. It's a subjective call for each doctor.

I know that the estimated 3 to 5 percent of women afflicted with PMDD are different from me- they feel their hormones hijack their lives- and I'm thankful the medical establishment is doing something to give them relief. But while Lilly's official line about Sarafem is that it's intended for PMDD, the company's Web site ([www.sarafem.com](http://www.sarafem.com)) and its advertisements suggest otherwise. The drug is mostly touted as a treatment for the more prosaic ills of sadness, bloating and crab-biness. Lilly won't divulge its sales numbers, but one spokesperson did tell me that Sarafem was most commonly prescribed for women complaining of "irritability."

Eli Lilly hails Sarafem as a great step forward for women. (It's also great for the company's bottom line. Lilly's patents on Prozac expired in August, and strong Sarafem sales could help offset the inevitable losses of no longer having a monopoly on the drug.) But if you ask me, it's also a step back. Not for those who truly suffer from PMDD, or even those whose PMS is borderline harrowing, but for millions of less severely afflicted women who are implicitly told that their monthly emotional bouts should be quashed. I worry that by medicating these outbursts across

the board, we're heading back to Victorian times, when "hysterical" ladies stricken with the "curse" needed to be shushed.

I don't care to be shushed. The malaise, the pimples, the swollen breast so tender that I wear a sports bra to bed- these I could do without. But when PMS hits, I enter a slightly skewed reality in which I see and feel things that are invisible to me the other twenty-odd days of the month. This makes me a better friend to tell your troubles to. As a journalist, I am more able to empathize with my subjects and translate their experiences into words. When I'm in a full-on fit of mopey, dewy-eyed mania, I live life the way I did before I became a mature, even-keeled, sensibly sensitive adult. I'm the girl I was when life was set to tragic poems and euphoric songs, when I would fall in love just like that (a single soulful conversation could do it), and be mortally wounded just like that (by the cut of an unkind word). When I was that girl at nineteen, the dissolution of a friendship so devastated me that the only relief I could imagine was to fly away. So I emptied my bank account and headed to Greece for three months.

It was exhausting to ride that roller coaster. I couldn't be that way and have what I have today: a husband, a career, a home, stability, sanity. But there are times when I question what I forfeited to be this contented woman. Am I somehow leading a dishonest life now that the painful edges- and blissed-out highs- have been dulled? Then, with my monthly emotional rush, I get a reprieve from the relentless steadiness, and I realized I really haven't given up so much. Under the influence of PMS, I can strip away decades of experience, layers of justification, thickening, and politicking, and evaluate my life with renewed clarity. Two years ago at a party, I had a run-in with a hideously rude lawyer who alternately

bragged about his wealth, berated artists, and proclaimed that dating women over thirty was a sign of defeat. I usually write off such idiots, but because I was in PMS mode, my annoyance deepened into existential angst. I started to dwell on other things that were upsetting me- from abstract notions about our overly consumerist culture to personal worries about how hollow my work had become. I even talked to my husband about moving to Spain. But then the PMS lifted, taking with it the compulsion to flee and leaving me to mull the real issue: how to make my life more honest and meaningful.

Sometimes my PMS acumen wreaks havoc. I've quit jobs- walking out of a lucrative waitressing gig because the manager sniped at me- and compromised my credibility by losing my cool in front of colleagues. I've strained friendships and alienated lovers. My husband can chart my menstrual cycle by my "there's something wrong with you" tantrums, but he knows my outbursts are like summer storms, inevitably best just weathered until they pass.

That said, I'm aware my emotional surges dent his life, and those of my friends and family. It doesn't surprise me, although it still bothers me, when I hear patients and doctors explain why so many women are seeking PMS treatment: They are concerned with how their altered state affects those around them. Maybe PMS is so reviled by our culture because it forces women- who are meant to be nurturers- to go inward, to look after themselves. A wife who's exiled herself to a dark room might not want to organize dinner or be the family cheerleader. Reveling in my menstrual sensitivity may be selfish, but it's also necessary. PMS connects me to a part of myself that I would be lost without.