

Menstruation is power - the power of knowledge, understanding and love of your own mind, body and soul, the nourishment and nurturing of the Feminine - The Wild Genie.

Immediately engaging and beautifully written by Alexandra Pope, *The Wild Genie* is a self care guide for all women who want to enjoy their cyclical nature and experience a fulfilling and healthy life. It is also for parents who wish to pass on a positive experience of menstruation to their daughters, and for men to help them gain an insight into the world of women.

The Wild Genie presents a unique approach to menstruation that moves beyond biology to restore a dignity and deeper meaning to a woman's cyclical nature.

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the wild Genie

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4. *Depression, Loss of Meaning and Self Loathing*

"If we have the courage to face into the dark we may witness the slow epiphany or showing forth of the feminine" (Hall, 1980, p.19). The feminine knows the necessity of darkness for the creative process. The seed germinates in the darkness of the soil, the foetus grows in the darkness of the womb.

Because we have difficulty appreciating dark states, we can tend to feel cast adrift from ourselves and the world, disconnected from all meaning and purpose. A common experience for many women just before, and very occasionally after, bleeding. For some there may simply be a temporary collapse of spirit, a blue feeling and sense of self doubt. For others it can be an intense feeling of hopelessness. Women who suffer from clinical depression, like those who suffer chronic health problems, may also experience an amplification of their symptoms.

Depression is a turning inwards, sometimes so much so that our thread back to the world may feel completely severed. When we feel depressed we may perceive something that's too painful to know, or too overwhelming to grasp, or act on. Perhaps the knowing is more "in our bones" than in our brain so it's hard to articulate. I think at the heart of depression is a great longing to feel a deeper meaning and to experience more profound places in ourselves. Ecstasy, a quality deeply imbedded in the menstrual experience, is the other side of depression.

After an event has occurred, usually a painful one, women

will often say she "knew" or sensed what was happening all along but because the idea was painful she would push her knowingness to one side, later to be confronted by the truth. If she had been able to act on her hunches she may have felt more empowered.

Despair may also have a direct link back to a painful past trauma. This despair is one you can normally cope with but your menstrual sensitivity won't now let you. Or menstruation may be intensifying feelings of depression at not having conceived, or not being able to conceive.

Just as anger rises in you about injustice in the world, your depression could also be a response to the many despairing events happening in our times. The 20th century was after all the most brutal century on record. How can we not feel an incredible bleakness about the way we are treating each other and the planet?

Depression can sometimes be our psyche's need to escape from superficialities. I can't help speculating that the relentless "upbeat" atmosphere of urban life is enough to make anyone feel down. Not having to be continuously up and out there being seen and getting ahead can sometimes be a relief.

To sometimes feel empty and lost is a normal experience and a part of life. Of course you deserve to be joyously happy — I don't wish depression on anyone. But the more we run from such feelings the more monstrous and out of control they'll become. Because depression usually slows us down, even stops us altogether, it's the natural companion to ceaseless activity. Your down times are the doorway to exalted states — with depression as your co-traveller you will also be able to experience great joy.

Your sadness and emptiness inform the joy and plenty. To experience these exalted states you need to risk going into the parts of yourself you don't like — those dark and empty places

that you catch out of the corner of your eye but usually keep at bay with such things as activity, food or television. Emptiness, loss and sadness will be there to greet you. But if you go with these feelings rather than fighting them you'll find their opposites will come to you more easily.

So, cradle yourself through the premenstrual downturn being aware that "to know" you must have moments of complete "not knowing" — a healthy dose of doubt. And remember that when the blood comes the cloud will lift. For some women there is even a dip again on about Day 5 or 6 of the cycle. Don't forget that as we move out of menstruation we enter another transitional moment into the ovulatory world.

I believe this postmenstrual "dip" could be linked with a woman's overall health. If in general she suffers from chronic fatigue symptoms, the loss of blood may overly weaken her, leaving her emotionally more vulnerable. The Chinese believe that at menstruation a woman loses chi, or essential energy, also possibly accounting for this "dip".

Life is cyclical and we humans are not exempt from that rhythm of generation and regeneration, of death and rebirth. In Western culture we're fond of the rebirth but not very good at accepting the dying or letting go. We imagine that death is always followed by more death when in fact it is "... always in the process of incubating new life, even when one's existence is cut down to the bones" (Pinkola Estes, 1992, p. 135).

Around menstruation, when you feel yourself descending into darkness and emptiness, remember this. It's better to find someone to help you learn how to go with your depth of feeling, than it is to medicate it. We have a natural ability to regenerate after such experiences and useful though medication can feel in the moment, it may be depriving you of that renewal and a life greatly enriched from the experience. I am not referring here to those of you who are being treated with

medication for a chronic depressive illness that is strongly present whether you menstruate or not. If you're taking medication it's vital that you don't stop taking this medication without consulting your health practitioner.

Self loathing

A vivid feature, and perhaps even the cause, of the menstrual "down" time is a sense of self loathing. Suddenly you find yourself under the penetrating gaze of your Inner Critic. This self examination can cut deeply into your core and paralyse you. Or in turn have you lashing out at the world as a way of deflecting the internal attacks. Either way it's bleak.

This critical voice is the part of you that is condemnatory, puts you down at every turn and doesn't believe in you. It enjoys pointing out what you have failed to achieve rather than acknowledging your successes. It's a constant in most women's lives but its voice becomes even more penetrating and shrill in the premenstruum. It has a way of getting you to examine everything you think, feel and do ... and, guess what, you usually come out wanting in its eyes.

Sometimes in my counselling practice, a woman will come to a session cast into the deepest pond of despair. She is but a day or two away from her bleeding, or has just ovulated. Nothing is working. After all the months of therapy she still feels she has got nowhere and is ready to give it up. Yet when I see her at the next session (yes, she's decided to come to one more) the previous despair is forgotten. It might as well never have existed. Although she may feel better it can be a risky position. The more she disowns her despair the more it will rise up and bite her each time the period comes. But those women who continue to attend to themselves will find the dips ease over time.

Why is the inner critical voice able to wreak such havoc at menstruation? It's because your defences are down — that vulnerability at work again. I believe to cope with this you need to become more comfortable with self examination. It's good to be called to account for what you're doing. Are you doing what you really want, are you being true to yourself, are you valuing who you are? Remember, a little doubt is very healthy.

Your criticism, whether of self or of others, will often hold a kernel of truth. You need to attend to this truth. So, after you have peeled yourself off the ground or picked up the recipient of your criticism, don't wholly back track on what you have said. It's often the way the criticism is delivered that's problematic and needs apologising for, not all of the content of what was said.

Loathsome though that inner critical voice can be, it's challenging you to stand up for yourself, and if you really find you can't justify a particular aspect of your life, treat your critic's penetrating observations as a catalyst for getting you to change what is truly not working. Recognise your premenstrual self examination as a being-called-to-account moment. While it's challenging, with awareness and time, it will make you stronger.

If you're particularly tough on yourself, which can also be reflected in being judgmental of others, I would recommend you see a psychotherapist. She or he can be an ally, helping you stand up to this challenging voice. Facing your inner demons can be a delicate and slow process.

If you can learn to ride the cyclical ups and downs with greater acceptance you'll develop an incredibly useful and resilient psychological muscle that will prepare you for any major life challenge. To go Up and Out into the world, you need to be able to go In and Down. Menstruation is one of those useful In and Down moments.

Facing the inner critic

Jackie came to me for therapy because she felt bleak and devoid of meaning. When she didn't have to work she would often take herself to bed not wanting to connect with anyone. Nowhere was this need more acute than in the premenstruum.

She had almost no faith in herself, and our work together was a slow recovery — to learn to stand up to her inner critic, to credit herself with the things she had achieved which were numerous but which she often dismissed. Getting out of the work she came to hate, and finally finding a relationship in which she felt loved, were also vital in helping her to find some lightness and meaning in her life.

As her life improved, her premenstrual downturn also improved. She still retreats just before she bleeds. When she makes that OK for herself, rather than fighting her need for solitude, her depression lessens. She becomes OK in herself.