



Mental Health & Women

Introduction

In Australia, more disability, dependence, and time out of the workforce can be attributed to mental illness than any other health problem. Position in society and experiences of living in society can explain the differences in the mental health of women and men.

Sex Differences

There are significant differences in the types of mental illness affecting women and men, and the ways they are prescribed and react to medication.

- The most common mental illnesses experienced by women are depression, bipolar disorder and anxiety.
- Eating disorders affect more women than men.
- Depression is widely reported to be twice as common in women than men.
- Deliberate self-harm is common in adolescents; more so in young women than young men.
- 10-15% of women report experiencing depression shortly after childbirth.
- Women are more likely to suffer with more than one mental illness at a time (co-morbidity), which is linked to increased severity of mental illness and increased disability.
- Drug trials often exclude women, so when given medications based on knowledge gained from trials on men, women often receive larger doses than are needed.

Gender Influences

Women are exposed to a wide range of specific risk factors that can increase their risk of poor mental health. When these risk factors occur together, women are at higher risk of developing co-morbidities.

- Women are affected unduly by the burden of poverty, and this influences their likelihood of suffering depression.
- Lesbian and bisexual women report worse mental health than other women, and Indigenous Australian women commit suicide at nearly twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australian women.
- Women are much more likely than men to experience violence. Depression in adult women is between three and four times higher if they have experienced sexual abuse as children, or partner violence as adults.
- Women are more likely to work in jobs that are unstable and of low status, and to take on the unpaid role of carer.
- Traditional roles expose women to higher stress and make it more difficult for them to change their stressful situations.

Women are more likely to be diagnosed as depressed than men with the same symptoms, and are also more likely to be prescribed anti-depressant medication than men with the same diagnosis.

Hospital settings for the treatment of mental illness can be very threatening due to the high ratio of men to women. This puts hospitalised women at high risk of assault, threat and loss of privacy.

Implications for the Future

- Women's mental health outcomes could be improved by addressing the risk factors that specifically impact on women.
- Evidence on the impacts of gender and mental health focuses mainly on the differences in frequency of mental illnesses. In the future, research, contributing factors, outcomes, health-seeking behaviours, and the response of health services need to be addressed separately for women and men.
- There is a need for treatment facilities and services to be tailored for the different and specific needs according to gender.

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