

## WOMEN & MENTAL HEALTH

The following information has been produced by "Head On" to whom we extend our thanks.

HEAD ON is about -

Women - their feelings, experiences and reflections.

Helping women become more responsible for their own wellbeing and mental health.

Preventing despair and mental illness.

Increasing awareness of the politics of mental health for women.

Through:

Highlighting the pressures and conflicts which women face in their lives.

Making information available.

Encouraging self-help and mutual help.

Exposing gaps in the services.

Challenging inappropriate services and encouraging alternatives.

HEAD ON is supported by the Scottish Association for Mental Health

Many of us come up against pressures and conflicts simply because we are women! We're expected and expect ourselves to do well whatever we're doing - as worker, mum, wife, housekeeper and carer.

Most of us cope most of the time with the different demands made on us. However it is not always possible to do everything and sometimes things just get too much ... We may look competent and on top to others but a lot of the time that's not the way we feel inside at all. We imagine everyone else is coping except us and this makes us feel even worse!

If we admit to others that we are finding things difficult, we can be made to feel that we haven't come up to scratch or that we're ill - or we're told 'pull yourself together women!'

No wonder we sometimes feel 'no good' and 'not much use to anyone'.

#### WHAT SHOULD A WOMAN BE LIKE ANYWAY?

Until not so long ago the answer was clear. She should be content with her home and family. Lots of us enjoy this. But some of us are surprised when it's not totally great. The dream is not all its made out to be. We begin to feel confused inside - there must be something wrong with us.

Now that some of us choose when and if to have children, it looks as if we have more control over our lives.

But have we? We can still be made to feel pretty odd when we don't conform. Sometimes the pressures are so great that it's really hard to know what we want for ourselves.

#### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE CHOOSE TO WORK?

For many of us its difficult to know just WHAT we want to do and HOW to set about it. We lack confidence in ourselves.

Most of us end up in jobs which don't offer us much - and we still have our other job of keeping the house and making the food.

For those of us who do find creative and inspiring work, its hard going. In trying to succeed we can finish up feeling drained, exhausted and not much good for anything!

WHERE we live and HOW we live also affect how we feel about ourselves.

- with young children you can feel tired and trapped when you stay away from your own family and play groups are few and far between.
- its awful when you can't get a job. It's even worse when you know there aren't any around.
- not having enough money can drive you off your head.
- popping down to the shop becomes a nightmare when you stay on the 19th floor and your legs are bad.

You get fed up when nobody listens to what its really like for YOU.

"I'm just a housewife", "I'm only a stupid woman" ...

These comments ring true for many of us. We grow up learning that women should:

- please others
- care for others
- cope with others problems
- believe that men and children have priority

Women also learn:

- not to think for themselves
- not to feel
- not to express themselves
- not to put themselves forward

No wonder we only exist as others see us - and do what others expect of us.

#### HOW CAN WE FEEL GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES

#### IF WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO BELIEVE IN OURSELVES?

Other people in our lives are more important than we are - our men, our children and our families - at least that's how it feels!

### WHAT WOMEN SAY

- "I can't cope with the kids without my fags. It gives me 5 minutes peace."
- "I know I'll put on weight."
- "I feel embarrassed if I'm the only one smoking."
- "I got so bad-tempered when I tried to stop my family couldn't stand it."
- "I really enjoy smoking."
- "It's a disgusting habit, isn't it?"
- "My husband's given up but I haven't the willpower."
- "I wish something would make me want to stop smoking."
- "I live alone, and it's my only pleasure."
- "It gives me something to do with my hands when I'm in company."
- "I hate the feeling that I can't do without it."
- "I stopped when I was pregnant but after the baby was born I was back on right away."
- "I smoke when I've got nothing else to do."

### WOMEN AND SMOKING

Many women lack confidence. They don't feel sure of themselves. Smoking seems to help them handle the pressures and conflicts they are up against. Once started, it's difficult to stop.

42% of Scottish women smoke. Most wish they didn't.

Girls are smoking earlier and now more young women are smoking than young men.

There are lots of good reasons for stopping smoking.

Most women know about lung cancer but there are other problems for women:

- more heart attacks
- more bronchitis and shortness of breath
- more complications if they use the contraceptive pill
- a lot more minor illness
- a slower recovery from operations
- an earlier menopause

Babies of smoking mothers are more likely to have problems at birth and afterwards, and children whose parents smoke are more likely to smoke themselves.

2183 Scottish women died because of their smoking in 1980 and 3750 were admitted to hospital.

The single most important thing you can do to improve your health is to stop smoking.

Over 3 million women in the U.K. have given up and not all of them found it was a difficult thing to do.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

Think about your smoking.

Look for other ways to build up your confidence.

Talk to your friends.

Suggest smoking as a topic for discussion in any group you belong to.

Are you ready to stop?

Can you get together with your friends to support each other?

Some of us find it difficult to get on with people at all. We say we get on fine by ourselves but it's pretty lonely inside.

For others of us, its surprisingly lonely when the children leave home or when we lose someone we love. We can be left feeling devastated.

We feel we ought to be able to cope with being on our own and not show how terrible we feel but it goes on hurting inside. Anger and depression can take over. But the lack of, and the loss of, people in our lives is real - we need to admit just how sad we feel.

We all have limits. Where do we go when we reach them?

- We try to tell someone and may well be told that we are -

'hysterical' - 'neurotic' - 'irrational'

'overemotional' - 'bad' - 'funny wifie'

- We may try other ways -

we stop eating - we overeat - we smoke too much  
we drink too much - we do too much -

or we do too little and feel bored out of our minds.

- Some of us feel sad and despairing and gradually withdraw into a lonely isolated shell. We feel terrible inside.

- Rather than admitting that we can't cope with all the different pressures and conflicting demands it is easier to say - 'I don't feel well' and so we go to the doctor for help with a variety of symptoms. The answer is often pills. In a crisis they can give us a real respite and they can tide over a bad patch. But they are only part of the answer.

Our emotional wellbeing and mental health depend on finding a way which lets each of us feel 'good enough' about ourselves inside and which enables us to get on with our lives with a sense of purpose. We don't have to be superwoman or the fairy on the Christmas tree!

HOW? HOW? HOW? HOW?

The Women's Health Fair is all about our health and the health services. Traditionally, women have looked after other people's health. We are now beginning to realise that our own health is important. We can determine more than we thought for ourselves.

For many of us health means physical well being.

But of course our whole health involves much more than our bodies although it is often our bodies which tell us how we are.

What is also important but harder to express is how we FEEL about ourselves.

We also have a lot going on inside. Our minds eye, secret dreams, inner feelings.

Our own experience - which truly belongs to each one of us.

Our reflections - what do we think of ourselves and our lives?

Our inner life is full of meaning. It gives us clues about our emotional and mental well being.

WE ALL KNOW ABOUT FEELINGS - WOMEN HAVE TOO MANY OF THEM!

They make us flare up in anger, weep with sadness, shiver with fear, and experience sickly waves of anxiety. They can also express great joy, freedom and love. Other people don't always want to see them in action.

- we ourselves are afraid to let loose such strong forces. We keep them well under.

But they don't go away.

- they haunt some of us in our dreams, nightmare and memories.

- for others they go underground so far that all we feel is a heavy stone deep inside.

- for a few, they become the kind of energy which allows us to be creative and experience life to the full.

ANGER

Anger is perhaps the most difficult feeling for us women to let ourselves think about or talk about.

- it is frightening to feel that violent force inside - we might go quite out of control if we express it.

- angry women are not appreciated by others!
  - being angry can reduce us to tears too easily.
- But buried inside, it does nasty things to us. It turns into depression which leaves us feeling paralysed and flat. We need to express the anger. But how?

Somehow we have to learn a middle way between being passive and submissive and hostile and aggressive.

We need to learn to assert ourselves and express our feelings more clearly. Then we can move ahead.

Anger is also about loss and sadness. So that we are not overcome by hopelessness and despair, we push these feelings deep down into our inner selves. It is hard to let ourselves weep - we ought to be able to cope. Only silly women cry. They are told to 'pull themselves together'. The 'Crying' workshop will give us an opportunity to talk together and find out what our tears are all about.

We take a big step forward when we see our feelings as strengths and harness them in our own cause. Gradually:-

- we stop feeling foolish at our softness and begin to see our own worth.
- our gifts of appreciation begin to have real value and become recognised by others
- our natural nurturing begins to come from our heart instead of being what we 'ought to do'
- we begin to take over the shape and progress of our own lives
- the strength and meaning of our intuition comes home to us and we begin to trust ourselves

#### ATTRIBUTES WE HAD THOUGHT WERE USELESS BECOME OUR GREATEST ADVANTAGE

What do I DO with my secret fears and hopes about myself?

- begin to acknowledge them as real
- trust yourself a little and find inner bedrock
- decide what choices you have got and how you can make them
- if you haven't got much choice, look at your assets for survival. You can learn to cope and survive. Take a day at a time.
- begin to share feelings with other women. Listen, be listened to, Be understood.

#### OTHER WOMEN FEEL THE SAME AS ME

- If there isn't a women's group nearby, get one going with a few close friends. Everyday experience is the stuff of our lives.
- Learn to laugh and try to see the funny side of things.
- Learn to assert yourself - your cool head is as valuable as your warm heart.
- If you've got a special fear or problem, join a self help group or start one yourself.
- Letting go a bit, resting more, learning to relax and breathe properly are within reach of us all.
- Be good to yourself - do a nice thing everyday which gives you pleasure - look at the flowers, day dream a little ...
- Get into ACTION - difficult for so many of us! Try out things until you find something that feels good to do.

As we take over our lives we begin to be able to make decisions more easily and problems diminish a little. We let go and don't try so hard to be all things to all people. Our inside and our outside come together. We begin to know who we are and to experience a genuine sense of well being.

#### A WOMAN IS HER OWN GREATEST ASSET

## WOMEN AND ANXIETY

### Do You Ever:

- Feel you can't cope with another thing?
- Feel your stomach churning for no real reason?
- Lie awake worrying - about tomorrow, next week, next year, illness, ageing, death ...?
- Find yourself rooted to the spot with fear in the supermarket?

Margaret : It seems as if she has everything she could ever want in life. And yet she is forever seeking reassurance about how she copes - with her job, family, friendships ....

Most people she knows always seem much more clam and capable than her.

Beth's house is damp and her children are often ill. Her husband is a heavy drinker and sometimes knocks her about. There never seems to be enough money. She lives with a feeling of constant anxiety - she just feels a bag of nerves and does not know where to turn. Pills don't seem to help much.

Susan has been terrified to leave the house for a couple of years. Whenever she goes out, she experiences devastating panic attacks and she fears that the dreadful feelings might completely overcome her - jelly legs, sweating, palpitations, nausea, trembling, diarrhoea, dizziness and a dreadful sense of disorientation and unreality. She believes she is the only person in the world who has these terrible feelings. She sometimes thinks she is going round the bend and is terrified of being put in a mental hospital. She has no idea why she feels this way.

### Women and Anxiety

Many women lack confidence. We don't feel sure of ourselves and our abilities. This makes it difficult for us to handle the conflicts and pressures we come up against in our lives. So we are wide open to anxiety - we can even start feeling anxious about being anxious!!

Many of us often feel tense and anxious before our periods and sometimes during the change of life.

Anxiety can be helpful - it can help us to prepare for big events like interviews and speaking up for ourselves. It can also act as a warning.

Sometimes anxiety is not so helpful - we just can't think straight, we can't make decisions or do anything. Yet, most of the time, most of us get by somehow!

For some women anxiety becomes overwhelming and the whole shooting match spirals out of control. This is what is meant by AGORAPHOBIA - a fear of leaving home or CLAUSTROPHOBIA - a fear of being shut in. When this happens fear turns to downright terror and dread. It is no wonder we feel PETRIFIED and BEWILDERED. For some, this may follow a period of prolonged stress but for others, it may come right out of the blue.

Anxiety is not a mental illness. You are not going loony!

There is a lot we can do for ourselves even if we can't change our situation.

### How can you Help Yourself?

- Learn to accept yourself as you are, worry and all.
- Stop driving yourself!
- Learn the wonderful skill of relaxation. If you suffer from pre-menstrual tension, relaxation is particularly important just before your period.

## WOMEN AND DEPRESSION

### Experiences of Depression

"Waking up each day feeling overwhelmed and helpless, full of panic and wondering how to cope. Pull the bedclothes up and shut out the world".

Ever felt like that?

Judy feels she is in a strange and unfamiliar world where there is no purpose to life.

What is life for anyway-

Susan feels the days are endless without beginning and end. Not worth getting out of bed. Life is monotonous.

Why was I born, there must have been a reason?!!

Mary finds she can't cope with work. Even the simplest task feels like a great, big heavy weight.

Why bother?

Kirsty 'explodes' with the family at the least little thing. Even the cat gets shouted at.

Why can't I cope?

Sometimes it is hard to explain how we feel inside. We feel guilty and ashamed of not coping. Then it seems easier to cover up how we are really feeling and pretend everything is alright.

Sometimes we are open about how we feel, but we run the risk of being told "pull yourself together".

When you are depressed, all the strong feelings get pushed out of sight but they don't disappear. Outside you appear numb, hollow, unreal. But depression is more than this. Inside you feel a mixture of crazy, mad, dumb, dead, numb, enraged, hysterical ...

### Depression

Depression can be a natural reaction to your life situation - bereavement, housing, physical illness, loneliness, boredom, unemployment, a bad marriage, or teenage children. So what do you do about it?

You can complain to your doctor about feeling sad, weepy, constantly tired or irritable all the time, and hope that he will come up with some answers for you.

If you feel you just cannot cope with life, perhaps you will be prescribed tranquillisers to calm you down and make you think more clearly. But you are not really solving your problems, only hoping that they will go away. Your doctor may prescribe anti-depressant pills. These may be helpful and tide you over a bad time but in the long term they are not the real answer.

(For further information on tranquillisers and anti-depressant pills, see the leaflet, 'Women and Pills').

There are no magic cures for depression. Sometimes, with the passing of time, depression lifts - as the old saying goes "time is a great healer". This can mean a lot to a depressed person, and is something to hold onto.

Given time you will feel better. You can feel the sunshine on your face again, smell the flowers in the garden and look forward to the future.

Getting better from depression usually takes hard work. There are no quick or easy answers. A lot of effort will have to come from you. Even so, ask other people for help, if you need to. It isn't always easy to do it all by YOURSELF.

Sometimes, it is very difficult to change from being negative to being positive.

WOMEN AND DEPRESSION (cont.)

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If you have a slightly better day, this is probably the best time to start.

What You Can Do For Yourself

- Try to learn more about yourself and what you would like from life. Alter what you can and accept what you cannot alter. Learn to like yourself - and help someone else.
- Try tackling the problems in your life. Can you change things to suit you and make life more comfortable for you? You do not feel so inadequate when you are doing something positive.
- Look after yourself, by taking better care of your physical health, eating good food, getting enough rest and sleep.
- Try spoiling yourself and learn to relax. Have a long, warm scented bath. Read a light, interesting book.
- Share your feelings and problems with someone else. You may find it easier to talk to another woman, who knows how you feel.
- Sometimes, it is easier to cry or get angry than to hold it all in.
- Try a new activity like pottery, yoga, meditation.
- Join or start a self-help group, or mother/toddler group and discuss how you feel.

Fight Depression

- Learn to say 'no' when you are too tired.
- Learn to put YOURSELF first sometimes.
- Take a day at a time - do not plan too far ahead.
- It can be done - you can smile again. Practise everyday and the world will slowly become a pleasant place to live in again.



## WOMEN & PILLS

Twice as many women are prescribed tranquilisers and antidepressants as men.  
Are YOU one of them?

If so -

- Are you worried about side effects?
- Would you like to come off your tablets but don't know if you should or how to do it?
- Have you thought about alternatives - e.g. talking through your problems or relaxation?

If these questions have started you thinking, you may like some more information. Despite the fact that thousands of women have been given these drugs, few of us know much about them. They are often prescribed for problems which aren't really 'medical' at all. They are commonly used to take the edge off stresses e.g. those caused by loneliness, bad housing, the constant demands of young children, a broken relationship, a recent death, worry about debts, work, or being unemployed, and so forth. The pressures of life can all mount up!

In the short term drugs may help you over a crisis in your life. But if taken for longer periods - beware - they may cause you to end up with more problems than you started off with!

- Remember that YOU are the best judge of whether a particular drug suits you or not.
- For some women pills are part of the answer.
- For others there may be different solutions.

What follows is a brief account of the three major categories of drugs commonly prescribed for symptoms of anxiety, tension, and depression - or what many of us simply call 'nerves'.

There are several different drugs in each group but only a few of the names have been mentioned here (to avoid confusion!)

Each drug has its advantages and disadvantages. If possible you should discuss these with your doctor. Also check with your doctor which major category your drug(s) belongs to.

## TRANQUILLISERS

e.g. Valium, Librium, Ativan, etc.,

These are used to treat anxiety, stress and mild depression.

- They calm you down
- They reduce nervous tension
- They help you to relax

They may help you over a difficult period in your life. A few days worth of the tablets is often enough and there is evidence to suggest that these drugs stop being effective if taken for longer periods of time.

**SIDE EFFECTS** - they can cause you to feel drowsy, dizzy or nauseated. Headaches and poor co-ordination are also common. Older people are likely to become confused. Occasionally they have the opposite effect and can make you excitable or aggressive.

**WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS** - these can be very unpleasant, especially if the drug is stopped suddenly.

## ALTERNATIVES:

- try talking your problems through - e.g. with women friends.
- try making some changes in your life.
- try taking some physical exercise, then afterwards relax!
- try keeping a few minutes each day just for 'you'.

SLEEPING TABLETS

e.g. Mogadon, Dalmane, Welldorm, Etc.,

These drugs are chemically similar to tranquillisers, but their main effect is to help you sleep.

Many people find them helpful, but you may feel tempted to increase the dose as the effect tends to wear off with time.

**SIDE EFFECTS** - these are the same as for tranquillisers (mainly felt the following day!) Withdrawal symptoms and difficulties in getting off to sleep naturally again may be a problem when the drug is stopped.

ALTERNATIVES:

- try calming your mind at the end of the evening.
- try taking a little walk before bedtime.
- try taking a warm drink.
- try making the bed warm.
- try reading something you enjoy.
- try to relax in bed.

ANTI-DEPRESSANTS

e.g. Tofranil, Tryptizol, Lentizol, etc Bolvidon(newer kind), Nardil, Parnate.

These are stronger drugs than tranquillisers. They are used to treat depression. They may be effective in helping to lessen the symptoms, but do nothing to combat the causes (which are usually life stresses). They are not magic cures!

These drugs must be taken for at least 3 - 4 weeks before they start to work.

**SIDE-EFFECTS** - these can be quite unpleasant. Some people find that they get a dry mouth, a "thick" head, blurred vision, constipation, palpitations and low blood pressure.

- There may be dangerous reactions if these drugs are mixed with other drugs, alcohol and certain foods.
- They are dangerous if taken in overdose.

ALTERNATIVES:

- try to understand the reasons for your depression.
- try letting your feelings out - e.g. tears, anger - rather than trying to 'keep up a good front'.
- try doing things which help you to feel better about yourself.
- take good care of your physical health.

Be patient, depression usually does lift eventually!

WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

Some drugs are more addictive than others. It used to be thought that tranquillisers were relatively 'safe' in this respect. This is now known not to be true. Withdrawal symptoms do occur and occasionally these are quite severe. The following are quite common - shaking, sweating, palpitations, panic attacks, feelings of 'unreality' and feeling unable to cope.

The general rule for stopping any drug is to reduce the amount you are taking gradually - e.g. over a period of 2 - 3 weeks.

Withdrawal symptoms, if you have them, may continue for quite a long time. Don't expect these to disappear over-night, they take time to wear off.

WOMEN AND FOOD

- "I seem to spend my life counting calories".
- "If only I were slim  
I would be able to cope  
I would be sexy  
I would be happy."
- "My day starts with me thinking about what I can eat today and finishes with me thinking about what I have eaten".
- "Food rules my life".
- "I'm afraid that if I eat what I want, I'll never stop eating".
- "I won't buy nice clothes till I'm size 14/12/10/18".
- "I feel completely out of control with food".
- "Don't tell me what to eat - it's my body".

We, as women, are surrounded by food. We buy, cook and serve food; have responsibility for feeding others, as well as ourselves. And, we must, of course, strive to be healthy and beautiful with slim, sexy 34-24-36 bodies - regardless of shape or age!

Not surprising then, that we often turn to or against food, at times other than when we are hungry. We might then eat compulsively, binge enormous amounts of food and/or deny ourselves food.

COMPULSIVE EATING IS ...

- ... Eating when you are not hungry
- ... Feeling out of control around food
- ... Spending lots of time thinking and worrying about food and fatness
- ... Scouring the latest diet for vital information
- ... Feeling awful about your body.

ANOREXIA is the other side of the coin of compulsive eating - avoiding food in response to the same difficulties. It is also a feeling of being overwhelmed by unconscious forces - being on a treadmill of alternately bingeing and starving.

FAT is not about ...

- ... lack of self control
- ... lack of will power
- ... greed

FAT is about ...

- ... protection
- ... sex
- ... nurturance
- ... strength
- ... assertion
- ... age

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

Talk to other women - anywhere, everywhere

Join a group - it's easier than going it alone, everyone has the same problem. It's such a relief to talk. Others will be all shapes and sizes.

Keep a diary - don't count the calories, write down your feelings instead.

WOMEN & SEXUALITY

- "We're talking about sexuality".
- "You mean sex?"
- "No, it's more than sexual attraction and activities".
- "That's really for the men - it's O.K. for them. What do women get out of it all? Frustration, broken hearts - and babies!"

Surely there's more to it than that for women! What is our sexuality all about?

As we grow up we become aware of ourselves as women in different ways:

- How we are touched and held.
- How we relate with our parents.
- The changing shape of our bodies.
- The way other people treat us and talk to us.
- The messages from home, school and work.
- Our own individual ideas and needs.
- Our deep feelings for, and physical attraction towards men and women.

All these go towards determining our own sense of sexuality:

- How I feel about myself as a woman.
- How I feel about my body.

Very often, many of us concentrate only on sexual awareness and activity. Nearly everything we do is coloured by expectations - our own and other people's! - to be sexy, attractive to men and to fit the model set up for us. We strive for the right shape 36" - 24"-36", a perfect skin, a youthful appearance and so on - and keep kidding ourselves on that we should match up to them.

In fact, not many of us feel very good about our bodies. We're "too fat" or "too thin". We've got "fat legs" or "too small a bust" ...

We compare ourselves endlessly and we keep on trying!

We also experience deep emotional feelings and physical longings which we don't always know how to express. At first, sexual relationships and activities seem the total answer. But there can be problems there too. Our bodies and our feelings don't always conform to expectations of sexual bliss! Our partners may seem unaware of our needs. We may not be too sure what these are ourselves, or how to ask for what we want. The result can be a deep feeling of inadequacy.

We worry too much about what our friends/lovers/husbands/relatives think. In trying to be what we think they want, we find it hard to hang on to how it feels to be me. We end up feeling confused and lacking in confidence.

How can we feel good about ourselves and our sexuality?

We can begin by:

- Trying to express ourselves as we think and feel.
- Deciding what we like and dislike.
- Accepting ourselves as we are.

HOW?

HOW?

HOW?

HOW?

cont. over

## HOW?

## HOW?

## HOW?

## HOW?

- Allow ourselves to feel and recognise the value of our feelings. Don't bottle them up. For example let ourselves weep.
- Allow ourselves to move, breathe and dance.
- Accept ourselves.
- Try pleasing ourselves more.
- Find out all we can about our bodies and how they work.
- Try ourselves out by talking when we feel safe enough. It is not always easy to do this, so ...
- If you can't talk, try writing or painting about your feelings and experiences.

Try expressing your sexuality in as many ways as you can - enjoy it and feel good about being a woman in charge of yourself and your body.

It's your body. Make your own decisions about when and where and with whom you have sex.