

*The Silent Storm Within:
Navigating the Tempest of PMDD
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Interviewees: Keilah, Anwyn, & Dr. Christina Aranda*

I was 19 years old when I was diagnosed with PMDD. Although I was introduced to several disorders, nothing quite described what I was going through every single month since I was 8 years old. Before my cycle, I was a happy individual, who was full of life and joy. Suddenly I would feel severe anger, irritability, body dysmorphia, depression, etc. I developed an eating disorder because of disruptions in my appetite. I was emotional and cried almost every day, and I felt as if I was a burden to those I love. The list of my symptoms goes on and on, as it does for many other women! Finding out that I had PMDD was a relief. Finally, I had answers as to why I was feeling such strong and negative emotions every month, a name to the phantom haunting me.

Seventy-five percent of women have mild symptoms of PMS; however, in the shadows of the 3-8%, there lies a brewing storm. This storm is catastrophic, crippling, and often unseen, yet misunderstood. PMDD, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, affects countless individuals (5%) and transcends the boundaries of ordinary hormonal fluctuations. In this article, we embark on a journey through the realms of PMDD. In researching this topic, I seek to illuminate the experiences of those living with this disabling condition, while showing the strength in the battle being fought.

Meet Keilah and Anwyn, two different women from two different backgrounds, battling the same crippling disorder. Keilah, a food therapist and recording artist, is a single mother

who's going to school for Chinese Medicine. Anywn lives on her own schedule; She is a freelance photographer.

Discovering you have PMDD can be a transformative experience, shedding light on the challenges 5% of women face. Unraveling complexities that come with this disorder, brings both relief and new understandings of one's emotional well-being.

“When I learned about PMDD, I was already researching bipolar because that's what I thought I was suffering from. I knew something was wrong,” stated Keilah when asked about her diagnosis. **“I didn't know what was wrong and then eventually PMDD showed up on my search for mental or pre-menstrual illnesses. I literally had every symptom from top to bottom and I've had them for years.”**

Like Keilah, many women such as myself, believed we had bipolar disorder as we were suffering from severe mood swings for years. In this, many women have had to find out about PMDD themselves before being properly diagnosed. Unlike, Keilah and many others, however, Anywn actually found out about PMDD in therapy, while also thinking she had bipolar disorder.

“My first time learning about PMDD was in therapy. My reaction was one of relief. I was relieved to finally put a name to the monthly symptoms that I had been experiencing for several years. There was solace in knowing that what I was experiencing was real -- It wasn't until I started tracking my symptoms that I realized that they coincided with my period which therefore led to the PMDD diagnosis.”

Discovering that one has PMDD can be both enlightening and challenging.

Recognizing this disorder opens the doors to a deeper understanding of the impact this disability has on our daily lives. In recognizing this, we can foster a journey towards improving our well-being and becoming our more empowered selves.

Living with PMDD can be an emotional rollercoaster, as we're met with intense mood swings and physical symptoms. These same symptoms create unique sets of challenges. Navigating daily life becomes a delicate balance, often, this is overshadowed by the anticipation of the monthly struggles that PMDD brings us. Understanding the impact of this condition is crucial for both the individual affected by this disability and those around them (family, partners, children, friends, etc.).

“There have been moments when, although I try to plan my months around my PMDD time, life happens and I have to manage tasks during my more difficult weeks. When this happens I navigate by being gentle with myself. I allow myself breaks between tasks and give myself plenty of time to rest and remind myself that what I’m experiencing isn’t forever and that it will pass soon,” stated Anwyn answering the question about managing her work schedule. **“I try to be as productive as I can in my “good weeks”. Meaning, that I usually have around 2 weeks post menstruation where I feel my hormones balancing again and I feel productive, energized, and motivated. Being a freelance photographer has been great because I can create my own schedule.”**

While Keilah might not be a freelance worker, she has a system in place that she relies on to help navigate her symptoms, emotions, and daily life as well.

“I’ve seen a lot of progress since my diagnosis last year, you know. I’m finally starting to see the remedies come to life in my system in my body. Jesus, herbs, and building a stronger support system is what’s helping me get back on my feet.” While this is helping Keilah, just like many other women including myself, life throws curve balls, and not everything always goes peachy in our implemented plans to help manage our symptoms. **“I’m not gonna sit up in here and lie to you and tell you that I can you know, work a normal schedule. I can’t, it’s just it is what it is,”** stated Keilah.

In the intricate dance of life with PMDD, women weave a unique strength, resilience, and unwavering determination. We often gain this because of time spent alone fighting or being brushed off by those qualified to help us. As women struggling with this condition, we can navigate the complexities of daily life, we can share our experiences, form powerful bonds, and foster a community that uplifts, emphasizes, and embraces our journey toward balance.

The emotional turbulence that women with PMDD experience transcends the ordinary spectrum of mood swings. Coming in the shape of a relentless force, PMDD engulfs you in a way that feels like a powerful hurricane, something like a severe/crippling storm. In this storm, you’re hit with severe emotions, ranging from debilitating sadness to unbridled anger.

Anywn stated when asked about emotions, **“Before my diagnosis, I was lost and confused. I didn’t understand why I was going through these recurring chaotic spells of emotions. I wondered if I was suffering from bipolar disorder.”** Just like Anywyn, as stated earlier, women often believe they have bipolar disorder, when in fact, they actually have this disability. For Anywn, PMDD, while not nearly cured, can be somewhat managed due to her

freelance schedule. Single mothers such as Keilah, however, have a harder time riding these emotional waves.

“I’m a single mother and I’ll be honest I haven’t (managed to accommodate fluctuating emotions). Being in the projects and being a single mother, if you know anything about PMDD you must know that it’s a disability because you can’t have a quality of life if you’re out of the count for two weeks out of the month. It’s very difficult to keep a job especially when I don’t have a strong support system but I did pull myself through.”

Acknowledging and addressing the fluctuations in moods not only is a step towards managing this condition but also can be an empowering act of self-care. By embracing resilience and seeking support (whatever that may be for the individual party), individuals can navigate the valleys of PMDD, finding a path toward emotional clarity, harmony, and control over their lives!

Perceived as a silent struggle, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder often bears the weight of societal stigmas. Misunderstandings, biases, and misconceptions cast shadows on the experiences of those grappling with this debilitating condition. When asked about facing these stigmas, Anwyn, viewed the issue from an interesting perspective.

“I feel like PMDD is still a relatively new diagnosis in the medical field. I have experienced doctors not taking my symptoms seriously and just dismissing it as regular PMS.”

Anywyn’s feelings on the issues of misconceptions show just how much we as women have to go through when we have a disorder as complex as PMDD. Keilah, on the other hand, speaks up about the bias and misconception we as women, especially women of color, face.

“I have encountered 1 million of them (misconceptions). The first one is when people say just pop an Advil and go. Unfortunately, we’ve already neglected the fact that PMS is a pressing issue in the United States — When you bring up PMDD they think oh it’s just a really bad period. We’re used to watching women suffer in general, but you just popping a pill and going, that’s not the way that goes. Women with PMDD have debilitating symptoms where it’s like I can fight when I’m sleepy, but I can’t fight when I’m fatigued.” She continued, **“The other misconception is being bipolar because a lot of the time, unfortunately for women with PMDD, it takes 12 years to get a proper diagnosis because we are confused with women being bipolar. But, what separates us is that our symptoms are cyclical, so they only happen from the first day of your ovulation to the last day of your period. There is no cure just yet, but the United States has only prescribed us adderall or birth control, or SSRI, and that is a misconception that helps us. It’s a holistic lifestyle, a strong and supportive system (that helps), but they think it’s just something that goes away and it’s not, it’s debilitating and it’s actually a disability. It’s incredibly infuriating that women are suffering in silence. There are a lot of women who do not come out of this, so they confuse it with a bad period but that (ones menstrual cycle) really should never make you suicidal. Every month, once a month, you should never be suicidal.”**

Keilah’s remarks are just the inner thoughts of every single woman who has PMDD. We’re often referred to as crazy and this isn’t fair! We’re constantly battling our thoughts while, even some doctors, act as if we’re being dramatic.

“I’m not crazy. You would go crazy if you went through what I had to go through. If you were to break the glass into 1 million pieces and try to piece it together and be told to walk

and told to do things that are pretty much impossible, that's what it feels like having PMDD. It feels like forcing yourself to walk through quicksand for three weeks, it's not fair. She (a woman) knows she has it (Pmdd). I'm not crazy, I'm going crazy," stated Keilah when further asked about bias surrounding PMDD.

In conclusion, dismantling the stigmas surrounding PMDD is essential for fostering understanding and support. By opening conversations and promoting awareness, we can work towards a society that embraces empathy and inclusivity for those affected by PMDD. We as a society need to foster a more compassionate and informed community, everyone deserves help- true and sincere help.

In the vast landscape of managing PMDD, self-care emerges as a crucial compass, guiding women through their monthly struggles. In recognizing the profound impact that this hormonal disorder brings, one must realize prioritizing self-care becomes not just a luxury, but a necessity.

"It pretty much piggybacks off the last question you asked me, it is understanding my seasons. So if I understand the seasons of my womb, if I am in spring, I'm gonna prepare for fall. If I'm in fall, I'm gonna prepare for winter and you know so and so forth. I do a lot of meal prepping. I learned about thermal natures, the thermal nature of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and how I can regulate my internal temperature because that has a lot to do with my mood swings or my fatigue. Just understanding the seasons in which your warm operates is how I prioritize my self-care because if I don't do it, I already know there's (the thoughts of) I can't do anything or I'm gonna hurt somebody or myself," stated Keilah.

Each woman in this world is completely different. Those with PMDD are especially completely different from one another and in that self-care can range from a bunch of different things! For Anywn, she stated, **“I allow myself as much self-care as I can during the peak of my PMDD symptoms. Reading, watching Netflix, and taking baths all help me to feel relaxed and grounded. I have found that prioritizing gentle daily walks has helped to ease anxiety symptoms. And something new that I’ve been working on is positive self-talk. I tend to have a negative outlook on life during my PMDD time. Combating negative thoughts and recognizing that I’m only having them right before my period has helped remind me that what I’m experiencing is temporary. I find myself reassuring myself a lot during PMDD that what I’m experiencing is temporary. When I’m in the thick of it, it can be hard to differentiate that. - Prioritizing self-care during moments of stress and pressure during PMDD has been very beneficial for me. I can still handle daily tasks and life stressors during PMDD, but it will take more mental and physical energy. If I allow myself extra rest during those times, then I’m more prepared to handle “life” during PMDD.”** Realizing the impact of this condition marks the beginning of one’s journey towards better self-care and management.

Exploring treatment options and providing empathetic support becomes pivotal in the mission to alleviate the emotional upheaval that accompanies this condition. Exploring effective strategies to manage PMDD symptoms is crucial for individuals seeking relief and empowerment. From lifestyle adjustments to targeted therapeutic interventions, a range of approaches can be employed to alleviate the challenges associated with PMDD. When approached with the question of her strategies, Keilah responded with, **“So strategies, I love that word honestly, it was me putting myself in different environments and I was used to you**

being in the projects or the hood. That kind of depression (where she's from) is not a thing, health is not a thing there and it wasn't until I started going to school and being around people, you know with a different vernacular with a different value system (that she realized it was). I just started testing the waters and explaining to people what I had in-depth and that's honestly how you sift people out. People are not gonna have the patience, grace, compassion, or understanding but out of 50 there's gonna be one, so I just keep trying until I get it, to be honest, there's really no set way to tell people. Even with the people who do understand it's still difficult for them to keep up with the mood swings and the stuff like that.”

Keilah also has an interesting way of explaining her mood shifts to others, what she uses, the four seasons! “Spring, which is follicular. That's when you're light and you're moving and you have pretty much all your stuff together. Summer is when it gets hot and you're ovulating. You're in heat and all that stuff, you have a boost of testosterone, you wanna fight, you believe in yourself, all these things but honestly for me summer is when my misery starts. Fall is the week before your period and the metaphors are there. You don't have energy, you can't move, all these things. You need to eat warmer foods, blah blah, blah blah, and then winter is your period right? You have to have soup and warm things so that the blood can move freely and all that jazz. So, what I do is, I educate my friends on how seasons work cause it helps anyone with the womb not just somebody with PMDD. It's how I speak and code like hey just so you know I'm in fall I'm in winter you know and they know when to not expect a text from me. They know when to not you know, invite me out or whatever the case may be.”

Every woman with this condition has an intricate plan or strategy to combat the varied emotions and thoughts they have during these bouts of time. Keilah relies on getting her rest.

“I proactively plan for my PMDD period by getting my rest. Rest is productive and a lot of women for some bizarre reason think that it’s not. I can understand someone in my shoes as a single parent as I beat myself up for rest, but it’s just something that our wounds so desperately need.”

Keilah also uses THC, Ketamine Mushrooms, and Herbal teas to help her during her tough times. As stated, every woman has her strategies and plans in place. For Anwyn, she said, **“Simply communicating with loved ones about what I experience each month has been very beneficial for me. I’ve explained to them what PMDD is and how it affects me each month. I’m fortunate to say that I have a good support system around me that has been understanding.”** She also later in the interview stated, **“I try to just manage my life around when I know I’ll be experiencing PMDD. Appointments, work responsibilities, family/friend get-togethers, travel, and even workouts. I attempt to make the most out of it when I’m feeling good. I’m not always successful at balancing it all, but being aware of where I’m at in my cycle has helped tremendously.”**

Embracing coping mechanisms/strategies becomes a lifeline. Not only do they provide one with solace in the storm, but mechanisms and strategies can illuminate a path toward reclaiming control and finding serenity amid PMDD hormonal turbulence.

Supporting a family member with PMDD involves a delicate balance of empathy and deep understanding. Loved ones, as for myself, play a crucial role in creating supportive environments that acknowledge the many challenges posed by PMDD. When asked what her family could do for her, Anwyn stated, **“All I ask of my family during PMDD is to just be patient with me. I tend to withdraw from loved ones during that time and just need to be left**

alone. Communicating with them about what I experience each month has been so beneficial for me.”

Keilah, was also asked the same question in her interview, to which she responded, “The way that they can effectively support me during my PMDD phases is, number one the knowledge of the seasons because like I said, I always let everybody know where I’m at, and with that follows compassion. I need a lot of compassion because I’m probably gonna say something that is not like me and it’s believable because it’s coming from my mouth. It’s like a disease of the mind (PMDD) sometimes I can’t think for myself so it’s almost like I’m a baby and I need someone. I think that proactiveness kind of goes hand-in-hand with compassion because it’s not gonna come out of you to take that extra mile if you don’t have compassion for me. So yeah, understanding my seasons, helping me do my hair, helping me clean my room, like just let you know in terms of like the love languages like an act of service is just really where it’s at for me. Just take the load off of me so that you know and accept me as I am. Oh, and praying for me! Please pray for me and pray with me it’s nice.”

Family, friends, or anyone you love makes up your support system. A support system is the most important thing a woman with PMDD can have. In essence, the robust support systems serve as pillars of strength. They foster a sense of understanding, empathy, and community for women navigating the challenges of PMDD.

Keilah continues to be a tremendous mother to her children. She is also in the process of working on a nonprofit to help single mothers with PMDD because as she stated when talking about living with PMDD alone, “impossible, it’s impossible”. Anwyn continues her PMDD

journey through therapy and her strategies as well. She also continues her gallery-worthy work as a Freelance Photographer.

A Peak through the Lens of a Psychologist

From a psychological standpoint, understanding and addressing PMDD requires a complex approach. Psychologists delve into the intricate interplay between hormonal fluctuations and mental health. The following questions were answered by Christina L. Aranda, Ph.D., a Licensed Psychologist.

Q: How does PMDD impact a person's psychological well-being, are there specific patterns or trends in emotional symptoms that you commonly observe when helping patients?

A: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) can greatly affect a person's psychological well-being and is in the class of depressive disorders. After many years of research, it became a diagnosable disorder in the DSM-5 (whereas before it was only mentioned in the appendix of the DSM-IV). When a person has PMDD, they tend to experience a handful of the following symptoms: mood swings, sadness, crying, sensitivity to rejection, irritability, anger, feelings of hopelessness, negative thoughts, fatigue, anxiety, muscle pain, and physical discomfort. PMDD can also diminish a person's desire to engage in activities they generally enjoy, like hanging out with friends and their usual hobbies. Women with PMDD can also experience disruptions in their eating and sleeping. These symptoms are very distressing and can take a toll on a person's psychological well-being, especially if they are not aware that they have a diagnosable condition. What characterizes this depressive disorder is that symptoms are only present during a specific part of a woman's menstrual cycle. Symptoms tend to begin following ovulation and tend to improve once menses begin. Women with PMDD will notice the trend that they have difficulty functioning the week before their period starts, and then begin to feel better once their period begins. What distinguishes PMDD from general PMS symptoms is the severity of

symptoms and severe impact on functioning in the areas of work, social activities, and relationships.

Q: Can you explain the interplay between hormonal fluctuations and psychological symptoms in PMDD, how do these differ from other mood disorders?

A: In this condition, the symptoms are caused due to the hormone fluctuations involved in the menstrual cycle. This is the essential feature that differentiates PMDD from other mood disorders. The symptoms start-up during the premenstrual phase of the cycle, peak at the onset of menses, and then begin to dissipate once menstruation actually begins. There tends to be a symptom-free period in the follicular phase after the menstrual period begins. Although other mood disorders can become exacerbated during PMDD, they are not contingent around the menstrual cycle. Not surprisingly, symptoms cease after menopause but can be retriggered by cyclical hormone replacement.

Q: What therapeutic approaches have shown the most success in helping individuals cope with the psychological aspects of PMDD?

A: The treatments indicated for PMDD include oral contraceptives, anti-depressant medication, and therapy from a licensed professional. Psychiatrists, OBGYNs, and Psychologists (or other therapist) should be part of the treatment team. Since PMDD is related to the menstruation cycle, one of the key treatments is hormonal treatments, including hormone contraceptives. Women who take this medication tend to experience less distress with symptoms. Due to the mood component of PMDD, medications that are used to treat anxiety and depression (i.e., SSRIs) are also prescribed to help with the symptoms. Sometimes it can take a while to find the right match in medication. It is also recommended to get therapy from a licensed professional like a Psychologist or other therapist. Being in counseling can help patients learn about what to expect with PMDD, the importance of tracking their cycle, and how to manage the symptoms by using healthy cognitive and behavioral coping mechanisms.

Q: Are there specific coping strategies or mindfulness techniques that you recommend for managing the emotional challenges associated with PMDD?

A: There are a number of techniques for helping manage PMDD. First, it is important to learn as much as possible about PMDD to understand what to expect and make sense of the experience. Tracking menstruation cycles and symptoms can help a person know what to expect and when. Knowing that symptoms like fatigue, negative thinking, and anxiety are hormone-induced can help someone have more control over it and how they manage it. Knowing that the symptoms will soon dissipate can help with not feeling hopeless and get through the distress of the symptoms. Patients can also use this information to plan their schedules accordingly, knowing that about a week out of the month, they will need to prioritize their mental health and self-care. Additional coping strategies include learning to engage in self-care in regards to nutrition, movement, sleep hygiene, relaxation, distractive techniques, accessing social support, and ways to manage their negative thinking.

Q: How can family and friends best support someone with PMDD from a psychological perspective?

A: One of the best things that family and friends can do is provide compassion and support, and understand that PMDD is a very real and distressing condition. It is not the same as PMS. Family and friends can help by learning about the condition so they know what to expect during the timeframe that symptoms are present. They should be mindful of what the person is going through and provide support during the various phases of PMDD. It is not encouraged to tell someone with PMDD to just try to “ignore it” or “power through it.” They should encourage their loved ones to do whatever is necessary to care for themselves, whether it is getting a nutritious meal, doing gentle stretches, or taking a nap. It can be helpful to ask, “Is there anything I can do to help you right now?” A little encouragement can also go a long way.

Q: Are there any cognitive-behavioral strategies tailored specifically to address the unique thought patterns or behaviors associated with PMDD?

A: CBT techniques in general can be part of the toolkit for helping with PMDD. Since negative and distorted thinking can be a hallmark symptom of PMDD, CBT can be used to help someone identify when their thoughts are being negatively influenced. A therapist can help the person identify the type of thinking they engage in during their PMDD cycle and then learn to shift their thinking pattern. For example, thoughts like “I will feel this way forever” can be changed to, “Actually, I feel this way because of PMDD, and my symptoms will get better soon.” Another example: “I will never have the career I want” can be shifted to “I know my thinking is impacted right now because of PMDD. I will work hard and will keep making progress towards the career I want. I will revisit this thought in a few days when my symptoms should be improving.” Additionally, behaviors that can help the person manage the symptoms can be identified, such as continuing to engage in some level of movement, practicing mindfulness activities, and/or taking more naps to deal with the fatigue. Identifying the thoughts and behaviors that will assist in getting through the difficult time can help the symptoms be less intense and distressing.

Q: What is the potential impact of PMDD on relationships, both personal and professional? What strategies can a woman use for maintaining healthy connections during symptomatic periods?

A: PMDD can certainly impact relationships, both personal and professional. Due to the level of distress a person experiences, they can have trouble functioning socially, which can create interpersonal conflict and problems. Paranoid or jealous thoughts can be heightened with PMDD, which can also cause problems with romantic partners. People are also more sensitive to rejection or perceived slights during this time in their cycle. If the person is aware of PMDD, then the family and partners can work together to manage these symptoms and not let it impact them as greatly as if it was unclear why the person was in distress. Specifically, families and partners can work on their communication skills, practice self-care plans, and allow for shifts in routines when symptoms are present. Due to the symptoms of PMDD, it can impact the ability to work consistently. Fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and physical pain can cause fluctuations

in work performance and attendance. Oftentimes, women can apply for support in the workplace in the form of accommodations and FMLA benefits.

Q: How does PMDD influence self-esteem and body image, and what interventions are effective in addressing these aspects?

A: PMDD causes physical symptoms like breast swelling, bloating, and weight gain. It can also severely impact sense of self and cause negative, critical thinking. A person who generally has a positive body image can suddenly have a very negative self-view. It is important to realize that PMDD is causing this level of criticism, and techniques can occur to help the person to be compassionate towards themselves and know that their current view of themselves is being impacted by PMDD and does not reflect their usual, everyday thoughts. Practicing mindfulness, compassion, self-care, cognitive reframing, and accessing social support can help these aspects.

Q: Are there psychological factors that may exacerbate PMDD symptoms, and how can individuals work on mitigating these influences?

A: PMDD symptoms can be exacerbated by factors like stress, interpersonal trauma, seasonal changes, and dealing with other mental health conditions. It is important to receive support around all these concerns so that PMDD is not further impacted. Support is essential and being in an environment that is not supportive can certainly make the symptoms and condition worse, while being in a supportive environment can help immensely.

Q: Can you share insights into the overlap between PMDD and other psychological conditions, and how accurate diagnosis plays a crucial role in effective treatment? As you know, I already have major depression as well as PMDD, what do I need to be mindful of?

A: When assessing for PMDD, it is very important to rule out other causes that better match what the patient is experiencing other than PMDD. Diagnoses that should be ruled out include bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and substance abuse. The cyclical nature coinciding with menstruation is the key piece to determining PMDD, and

the treatment provided can be different based on the specific diagnosis. Only when an accurate diagnosis is made can the most effective treatment plan be put in place to cause relief.

In closing statements, PMDD may cast a shadow on one's emotional landscape. However, with this, we can use knowledge and support as a powerful beacon of light. By gaining understanding, seeking professional guidance/help, and building a support team, individuals living with PMDD can navigate the challenges and emotions we go through more easily. You're not alone, you're loved, you're important, you're extraordinary! With the right teachings and tools, each day becomes closer to peace, a more balanced and brighter tomorrow.