

Research Article

Cultural Beliefs Associated with Menstruation and Link with Mental Illness-An Indian Male's Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2581.5822.202002>

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How to cite this article:

Kaur H, Chavan BS. Cultural Beliefs Associated with Menstruation and Link with Mental Illness-An Indian Male's Perspective. *J Adv Res Psychol Psychother* 2020; 3(1): 7-12.

Date of Submission: 2020-02-15

Date of Acceptance: 2020-03-18

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Menstruation is a natural biological phenomenon that is related to fertility and motherhood and overall womanhood, thus differentiating women from men as an individual. Since ancient times, there have been many cultural beliefs and taboos related to menstruation like restriction in entering kitchen or religious places. Menstruation has also been linked to many health issues including mental illness. The current study was planned to explore the cultural beliefs related to menstruation, amenorrhoea and its link with mental illness from an Indian male's perspective.

Aim and Objective: To explore the cultural beliefs related to menstruation, amenorrhoea and its link with mental illness from an Indian male's perspective.

Methodology: This was an open label, cross-sectional study conducted at Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College and Hospital, Chandigarh. Willfully participating male caregivers of psychiatry patients were included.

Result and Conclusion: A majority of caregivers lacked knowledge about menstruation as a large number of them were not aware of biological reason and source of bleeding and considered menstruation as a detoxification process in which the impure blood having toxins and rays is expelled out. Amenorrhoea was believed to cause adverse effects including mental illness.

Keywords: Culture, Beliefs, Menstruation, Indian, Mental illness

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural biological phenomenon in the women of reproductive age group which is characterized by periodic shedding of blood vessels and endometrial lining of the uterus through the vagina. It marks the onset of puberty and is related with fertility and motherhood and

overall womanhood. As it has been studied and stated in literature and in cultural history, there are some taboos and beliefs in common population's mind when it comes to menstruation, be it considering the woman sacred during menstruation or prohibiting her from entering kitchen or religious places.^{1,2,3,4,5}

Journal of Advanced Research in Psychology & Psychotherapy (ISSN: 2581-5822)

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Current study was planned to explore the cultural beliefs related to menstruation, amenorrhoea and its link with mental illness from an Indian male's perspective. Also, it explored the cultural beliefs of male caregivers towards menstruation and amenorrhoea in mentally ill patients who are on psychotropic drugs. It has been frequently observed in the outpatient and inpatient settings that patients face the predicament of having delayed menstruation as a result of psychotropics. This result is not only alarming to the patient but the caregivers feel the wave of dread too which is not always due to the fear of pregnancy.

Methodology

This was an open label cross-sectional study and sample was drawn after getting approval from ethics committee, using random number sampling from the caregivers of mentally ill (all spectrum included) patients visiting Psychiatry Outpatient Department (OPD) and Inpatient Services of Government Medical College and Hospital of Chandigarh in Punjab, India. The study was conducted over a duration of a month (June 2017).

A total sample of 50 males in the age group of 16 to 52 years

was recruited using random number sampling. The males accompanying the patient who were living with the patient were included. Those who did not live with the patient were excluded from the study. All the participants were administered a semi-structured questionnaire (in Hindi, Punjabi and English) developed for the study for assessing the cultural beliefs of caregivers towards menstruation and amenorrhoea secondary to antipsychotics. Before handing over the questionnaire, participants were asked their age, education status, area of living and marital status. Anonymity was ensured and participants were told to put their filled forms in a box kept in a room in outpatient department.

Result

Sociodemographic Details

Mean age of the sample was 35.3 years. 58% of the males were from rural background and 42% were from urban background. Above Matric population was 42% and below Matric 58%. Males who were married 84% and Unmarried 16%.

Table 1. Responses given by the caregivers of patients with mental illnesses

Question	Response	%	Conclusion
Reason behind menstruation?	To detoxify Hormonal changes To get pregnant God's wish to keep them fertile	42% 22% 20% 16%	Majority of males were unaware of the reason behind menstruation
Source of bleeding in menstruation?	Stomach Uterus Urethra Vagina Heart	32% 22% 22% 20% 4%	Significant proportion did not know about the source
Blood released in menstruation is different from rest of the blood in body?	Yes No	86% 14%	Majority of population agreed
If yes, How is it different ?	Is impure blood Contains toxins Contains bacterias and viruses Contains harmful ray	46% 22% 18% 14%	Majority of males thought it was impure blood.
Does the blood that stays in body while patient has amenorrhoea exerts adverse effects on the patient?	Yes-84% No-16%		Majority of males agreed
What kind of adverse effects?	Blurring of vision Depression and Mental illness Pain abdomen Pimples	22% 20% 18% 12%	20% of population thought amenorrhoea leads to mental illness

	Obesity Stones Joint pain Weakness	10% 6% 6% 6%	
Does amenorrhoea always means that the female is pregnant?	Yes No	78% 22%	Significantly high proportion thought amenorrhoea always meant pregnancy
Does entering a religious place or kitchen or touching a religious thing is considered forbidden when the female is menstruating?	Yes No	80% 20%	Majority of males frowned upon menstruating female going to temple and kitchen
If yes then why?	Women is not pure Considered unhygienic, dirty To avoid wrath of gods Leads to infections Women is being chased by evil spirits Bad aura People's wishes go unanswered	28% 18% 18% 16% 10% 6% 4%	Most popular response was impurity of the woman
Does having sexual intercourse is considered forbidden when the female is menstruating?	Yes No	80% 20%	Majority of patient frowned upon sexual intercourse while menstruation
If yes then why?	Leads to infection Leads to impotence Brings bad luck Makes the women infertile Produces a congenitally malformed baby Leads to death in the family	50% 16% 12% 6% 6% 6%	Majority of males thought it to be leading to infection or impotence
While menstruating the female should eat isolated from others?	Yes No	76% 24%	Majority of population agreed
If yes, then why?	To avoid the infection or contamination Destroys the foods nutrients To avoid the bad luck It invites the evil spirits	52% 26% 12% 10%	Majority of males reported infection or contamination as main reason
Does touching specific food items in the kitchen by the menstruating female ruin it?	Yes No	74% 26%	Majority of males agreed
If yes, then why?	Bacteria and toxins Bad rays Wrath of goddess of food (Annapurna) Contact with spirits	42% 32% 18% 8%	Majority of population reported bacteria and bad rays as the primary cause
Can the menstruation blood be used in black magic?	Yes, against the females to make them infertile Yes, against the males to seduce them No	46% 38% 16%	84% of males agreed

Can amenorrhoea induced by antipsychotics mean the female is infertile?	Yes No	76% 24%	Significant proportion agreed
Is menstruation linked with mental illness?	Yes No	80% 20%	A shockingly high proportion gave an affirmative that menstruation is linked with mental illness
Antipsychotic induced amenorrhoea can result in failure of medications given to the patient?	Yes No	84% 16%	Majority of males agreed that further given psychotropics would fail
Is amenorrhoea considered a bad omen or a prediction of bad luck?	Yes No	74% 26%	High proportion agreed
Does menstruation have a religious importance?	Yes No	68% 32%	Majority of males agreed
Is amenorrhoea contagious?	No Yes	56% 44%	Significant number agreed
Can amenorrhoea lead to change in physical appearance?	Yes No	82% 18%	Many males agreed upon this question
Does amenorrhoea mean that the women is possessed by evil spirits?	No Yes	70% 30%	Minority believed in so
Does amenorrhoea mean that the woman is impure?	No Yes	64% 36%	Minority agreed
Is it appropriate to stop or taper down the psychiatric medications in amenorrhoea?	Yes No	72% 28%	Surprisingly high numbers of males believed in decreasing or stopping medications all together
Is it appropriate to take the patient to some doctor in amenorrhoea?	Yes No	80% 20%	Majority agreed
Is it appropriate to use home remedies in amenorrhoea?	Yes No	84% 16%	Many males agreed
What kind of remedies?	Warm milk, lassi Almonds, nuts and dry fruits Carom seeds Jaggery Encircling the house of a young female 7 times Papaya Wearing red color, eating red food Exercise	34% 30% 12% 8% 6% 4% 4% 2%	Myths were present in 10% of people
Is it appropriate to take the patient to faith healer in amenorrhoea?	No Yes	76% 24%	24% male agreed on taking patient to faith healer

Have you ever heard a belief in your culture related to menstruation or amenorrhoea?	Restriction on sharing a bed during menstruation	26%	Number of myths was present in population
	Spicy food should be avoided	24%	
	Cleansing of old sins occurs during that period	20%	
	Negative effect on the weather	16%	
	Infertility of cattle upon touch	8%	
	Crying during menstruation is restricted	6%	

Table 1, shows the responses given by the male caregivers of patients with mental illnesses who were assessed on the questionnaire.

Discussion

This study highlights that there is lack of awareness regarding menstruation among the general male population and the myths associated with menstruation and amenorrhoea resulting from use of psychotropics. There has always been certain myths and cultural beliefs associated with the menstruation in the very minds of Indian population.¹ There is a need for community awareness and IEC activities in the society for the eradication of such myths. It is also seen that ambivalent sexism is prevalent in the LAMIC, there are certain hostile emotions involved especially in relation to menstruation.²

It is astounding that the myths and lack of awareness are not specifically present in the male gender as they are oblivious of the phenomenon of menstruation. It is prevalent in females too. In a study done in 2013, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs were assessed in adolescent girls about menstruation and dysmenorrhea, it was concluded that it was necessary to educate female students about the menstrual period health taking behaviors along with appropriate nutrition and exercise.³ As per a cross-sectional survey done in 2006 in Punjab, there were multiple taboos and myths associated with the women's health.⁴ In a cross-sectional survey done in 2013, it was found that the Chinese undergraduates were having negative attitude towards the menstruation.⁵

In our study, very minimal proportion of males knew the correct reason behind menstruation, source of menstruation and significant proportion is immersed in various myths and beliefs which included menstrual blood being impure, containing toxins, forbidding menstruating female from religious places to avoid wrath of gods, sexual intercourse while menstruation being considered a taboo leading to infection, impotence and bad luck, destruction of food items upon contacted by the menstruating female due to toxins, rays and wrath of gods, using menstrual blood to seduce a male or inducing infertility in a female. Many home remedies were explored in which several myths were found to be associated like wearing red clothes, eating red food and encircling a young female's house seven times. A high proportion linked menstruation with mental illness and

believed amenorrhoea secondary to psychotropics renders the female infertile. Many caregivers believed that it is logical to discontinue or taper down the medication when amenorrhea occurs. Out of many adverse effects associated with the amenorrhoea, a significant number of people named mental illness and depression being one of them.

Living in the Roots

The open ended question at the end of the questionnaire provided a gateway to the yet unexplored and unheard myths. These myths included restriction on sharing a bed during menstruation; spicy food should be avoided; cleansing of old sins occurs during that period; negative effect on the weather; infertility of cattle upon touch; crying during menstruation is restricted. The beliefs were linked up and embedded as religious concepts or old sayings by the ancestors.

Conclusion

Current research proposed exploration of cultural beliefs in care-givers' minds when it comes to delay in menstruation and the reason of fear and concern associated with delay in menstruation. The findings of the study are relevant as these will help us the clinicians to understand the knowledge and attitude of male caregivers who are rather reluctant and embarrassed to talk about menstruation or towards delay in menstruation. Timely intervention through psycho-education will improve retention into the treatment and will ensure better compliance.

Limitations

Although the sample size was small and the study was conducted on the institute population without any control, this study enlightens us about the scarcity of knowledge among male caregivers seeking treatment for various mental health problems of their patient. The findings are crucial as significant proportion of caregivers and patients decide to reduce and stop medication in order to deal with amenorrhea resulting in delayed response and increase risk of relapse.

Conflict of Interest: None

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