

Sacred curse of awareness

By Ruth Ostrow

Women have to be kind to themselves during this fragile time

FOR many years now I've been smitten with a regular, recurring sense of dread. It rises in the pit of my stomach and seems to take over my body, until I feel that I am underneath, not on top of, the smallest problem that comes my way. I'm filled with bleakness and doubt.

When the feeling comes on, I look in my diary and always, without fail, notice that it's a few days before my period is due.

Doctors call it premenstrual syndrome, or PMS, and it is the subject of much mirth, secrecy and disbelief. But for those of us who suffer menstrual problems, the so-called curse is as damning as anything an enemy could conjure up.

Until now, I've been utterly defeated by the process that seems to be about the balance of hormone levels.

But a courageous book, *The Wild Genie* (Sally Milner Publishing) by Sydney-based psychotherapist, author and health educator Alexandra Pope, is set to change the way a woman's menstrual cycle is viewed in Western society.

Pope's vantage point has such resonance and potency as to be life-changing. Certainly, having been lucky enough to hear her speak at a lecture last month, I feel there is a dignity in menstruation I never understood.

Because she talks about cycles in both men and women that are sacred and need to be honoured. Men, like women, have swings in temperament and testosterone levels but, because there is no word or concept for these fragile times, they go largely ignored.

But women, according to Pope, are lucky enough to have a cycle that helps them chart their deepest feelings and needs.

Pope draws on the wisdom of ancient cultures, where women, during the vulnerable parts of their cycle, were banished to bleeding tents, or set aside from the community. Not because the woman was thought to be unclean or a burden but, rather, because she became a seer, a wise woman and her wisdom was deeply honoured and respected by the tribal elders.

Pope explains that this is because the very thing that makes a woman like me feel inadequate, angry or wounded is the trait of hypersensitivity. The body, the hormones, become very sensitive to what is going on inside and out, and hence the flipside of "the curse" is that women become hugely aware, deeply intuitive and profoundly connected to nature and their inner wisdom during these times. Menstruation is, according to Pope, a time of regeneration and power. Women can get into altered states of consciousness while the body becomes a sensing organ -- knowing, loving, feeling the truth.

If there is pain in one's relationship, issues unresolved or repressed through the month, then the body becomes a receptacle for these emotional fibrillations, which is why women often agitate to bring these hidden, unconscious issues to the surface.

Because of her connection with nature, a sensitive woman can acutely feel the sadness and suffering of the world during this heightened time. But on a positive note, the woman is usually highly alive too, feeling the bliss of sexuality, getting intense pleasure from beauty, colours and sensations of the flesh.

For me, it feels like someone has turned up the volume on both pleasure and pain. A picture of a sad child will send me spiralling into despair, an apple crunched between my teeth can send me into raptures.

And I find that while I can't add two and two, I become very creative and right-brained. Which is why women in some traditions were separated -- so they could go into this special, very sacred space of awareness.

Pope says women need to be acknowledged for their cycles. They do not become disabled by their periods, but differently abled, and shouldn't be ridiculed for their deficiencies as wives, mothers or workers; rather, they should be honoured for the new talents, perceptions, love and creative gifts they bring.

This, she and I agree, is the true essence of feminism. That women do not have to pretend to be men to be respected in the workplace, popping in a tampon and a tablet and just getting on with it, as television commercials would have it. Rather, women can remain women and have allowances made for the knowingness they bring during pregnancy, menstruation or menopause.

But more importantly, women have to be kind to themselves during this fragile time. Forgiving their own inadequacies or mood swings, going to bed all day if they are feeling hypersensitive, or enjoying the blessings of the time.

Certainly not over-medicating themselves. Pope says that taking drugs to "normalise" our natural cycles -- be they menstrual or menopausal -- can deaden the psyche and kill the gifts along with the inconveniences.

"The world needs more vulnerability, not more armouring," she says.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 03 NOV 2001