



Follow your natural cycle

Pay attention to your menstrual cycle, says psychotherapist *Alexandra Pope*, and you'll start to see it as much more than a monthly 'curse'

For most women, menstruation is a hassle – something we just learn to put up with once a month. And for those women who suffer problems, it can be distressing. But what if our menstrual cycle could be a real asset, a means by which we can live a more empowered and healthy life?

During my twenties, I was aware of my cycle for contraceptive purposes, but didn't know it could be a useful inner guidance tool. It was extreme period pain in my early thirties that made me take

notice, although at first it felt neither useful nor empowering. The pain could last three to four days, recurring each month and leaving me exhausted.

To get well took time and enormous dedication. My overall health was poor – fatigue, allergies, poor digestion, insomnia and frequent flu, but I never got a name from the medical establishment for my menstrual problems.

My healing was a combination of self-care practices, including following a strict macrobiotic diet, and trying different treatments, including shiatsu massage, acupuncture and chiropractic therapy. Most importantly, I learned to work with my cycle's rhythm – in particular, to slow down coming into menstruation and completely rest during it. Reduced stress in turn reduced my pain.

Gradually, my symptoms diminished, and I continued – pain-free, my uterus intact and my

health transformed – for the rest of my menstruating years. I had discovered the power of the cycle not only to assist healing, but as a guide to create a more productive and fulfilling life.

Think of your cycle as a means of inner guidance and stress management. Note your mood and energy, and respond to that as much as you can within the demands of work and life commitments. It's like having the seasons of the year in your body; when you start to co-operate with those inner seasons, you'll begin to discover the positives.

The first part of the cycle – the days after you've finished bleeding – is your inner spring, a new beginning. You'll have vigour and inspiration, a clarity about what needs to be done and the focus to do it. This is followed by ovulation, the 'summer' of your cycle, and a time you may feel more easy and relaxed with yourself and the world. You're in superwoman territory, where having it all is just about possible, simultaneously rocking the cradle, while doing the million-dollar deal, being a goddess in the bedroom and the kitchen, and being there for all your friends. It's fantastic – while it lasts.

Just as seasons turn and the light shifts, so your mood shifts to a different perspective in the premenstrual phase, your inner autumn. It's the great feedback moment when you 'get real' about your life, and it's not always comfortable. You have a more detached power that can be critical and incisive, and allows you to sort out, speak out and clear away obstacles that are stalling your growth. And you can be overly tough on, and critical of, yourself and others. We often call this PMS.

As menstruation comes closer, you may experience more sensitivity, and find yourself wanting to slow down, sleep more and be less social. Don't fight it. This is your body encouraging you to take care of yourself. You are now coming into the final phase of the cycle, your inner winter. If you can allow yourself to wind down a bit, and don't suffer pain, or at least bad pain, you may find a delicious calm can come over you, like you're entering a very still, quiet, inner cave. You can let go all the worries and anxieties of the previous month and, as you do that, you may notice yourself

filled with new ideas and inspiration. Trying to skip this natural time of stress release and rest by keeping going can leave you exhausted, cranky and far less productive and creative in the next cycle. Women are lucky to have this monthly reminder.

Sinead, 40, read about this approach in a newspaper article and tried it out. After only two cycles, she felt a changed woman. 'I have been taking baby steps, just listening to my body and giving it what it needs,' she says. 'There has been an amazing change in my sleep patterns. I no longer have insomnia. I'm not cramming a packet of chocolate biscuits into my mouth for five days each month, convincing myself I deserve it because I'm doing too much, and full of guilt if I don't fulfil everyone's needs.'

Getting in tune with your cycle can be healing and enlivening. You'll start to feel a greater kindness towards yourself, and may experience more motivation to do whatever it is you need to heal and achieve your goals. 'I have been filled with new energy, hope and power,' says Sinead. 'I seem to be getting more out of each day. I feel thankful to be alive and in charge of my destiny.'

Alexandra Pope is a psychotherapist and author. Her latest book, co-authored with Jane Bennett, is 'The Pill: Are You Sure It's For You?'. For more information, go to wildgenie.com and womensquest.org

Think of your cycle as seasons of the year, each with its own identity'

TIPS FOR A GOOD PERIOD

- 1 **Prioritise yourself during your period**
- 2 Make a note in your diary of when it is due or roughly due
- 3 **Reduce your commitments at that time – do only what you have to**
- 4 Make sure you have healthy food in the house well before your period so you don't end up eating junk leading into and during it
- 5 **Minimise or avoid alcohol, coffee, tea, white flour and sugar**
- 6 If the sugar/chocolate craving is overwhelming, get yourself something special and enjoy it with utter pleasure and awareness – you'll probably eat less
- 7 **Practise kindness and tenderness towards yourself**
- 8 Do nothing, and rest

PHOTOGRAPH: PLAIN PICTURE