

Employer's Guide to \_\_\_\_\_

# Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)



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## Key Takeaways

- PMDD is a serious menstrual-related mental health condition affecting 5-8% of menstruating people.
- PMDD causes significant physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms in the days or weeks leading up to menstruation that can interfere with daily activities and relationships.
- Employees with PMDD can face significant barriers at work compared to those without the condition. This includes reduced productivity, increased absence and presenteeism, strained work relationships and increased likelihood of disciplinary action or job loss.
- Stigma, fear of discrimination, and lack of awareness and understanding can prevent employees from disclosing PMDD at work.
- Simple workplace adjustments such as flexible scheduling, working from home, access to mental health services such as counselling, and paid time off to manage symptoms, can be supportive for employees with PMDD.



# What is Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)?

Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) is a condition that affects some people who menstruate. It is a severe form of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) that causes significant physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms that can interfere with daily activities and relationships. These symptoms typically occur during the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle, which is the two weeks leading up to menstruation, and subside shortly after the onset of menstruation.

The exact prevalence of PMDD is unclear, but it is estimated to affect around 5-8% of menstruating people. It typically occurs in people of reproductive age and can start any time after puberty.

The exact cause of PMDD is not known, but it is believed to be related to the changes in hormones that occur during the menstrual cycle. Specifically, PMDD is thought to be caused by an abnormal response to the fluctuations in levels of oestrogen and progesterone that occur during the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle<sup>1</sup>.

Some researchers have suggested that PMDD may be related to an imbalance of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), in the brain. These neurotransmitters are thought to play a role in regulating mood, and disruptions in their levels or activity may contribute to the emotional symptoms of PMDD<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>1</sup>American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2018). Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). Retrieved from <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/premenstrual-syndrome-pms-and-premenstrual-dysphoric-disorder-pmdd>

<sup>2</sup>Halbreich, U. (2003). The etiology, biology, and evolving pathology of premenstrual syndromes. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 28 Suppl 3, 55-99. doi: 10.1016/S0306-4530(03)00098-4

Other factors that may contribute to PMDD include genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and underlying medical conditions<sup>3</sup>.

Common signs and symptoms of PMDD can include:

- ⦿ **Emotional symptoms:** Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, depression, feelings of hopelessness or despair, tension, and feeling overwhelmed.
- ⦿ **Physical symptoms:** Fatigue, bloating, breast tenderness, headaches, joint or muscle pain, and changes in appetite or sleep patterns.
- ⦿ **Behavioural symptoms:** Difficulty concentrating, feeling out of control, and withdrawing from social activities.

Individuals with PMDD may be at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors<sup>4</sup>.

## Why is it important to support colleagues with PMDD?

It is important to support colleagues with PMDD because the condition can significantly impact their work performance and quality of life. PMDD can cause a range of physical and emotional symptoms, such as fatigue, anxiety, depression, and irritability, which can make it challenging for individuals to cope with their daily tasks and responsibilities.

PMDD can affect people at work in several ways, including:

- ⦿ **Reduced productivity:** PMDD can cause symptoms such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and decreased motivation, which can impact an individual's ability to focus and complete work tasks efficiently.
- ⦿ **Increased absenteeism:** PMDD can cause physical symptoms such as pain, as well as emotional symptoms such as depression and anxiety, which can lead to increased absenteeism from work.



<sup>3</sup>Soares and Gomes (2018) discuss the epidemiology and treatment of PMDD, including the potential role of genetic and environmental factors in its development.

<sup>4</sup>Tschacher, W., Kramis, R., Merten, J., & Biedert, E. (2019). Premenstrual dysphoric disorder and suicidal behavior: A review. *Journal of Women's Health, 28*(2), 264-272. doi: 10.1089/jwh.2018.7134



- **Impaired relationships with colleagues and managers:** PMDD can cause irritability, mood swings, and difficulty controlling emotions, which can affect relationships with colleagues and managers. This can lead to interpersonal conflict and decreased job satisfaction.
- **Reduced job performance and quality of work:** PMDD can impact an individual's ability to perform at their best, which can lead to reduced job performance and quality of work. This can affect an individual's confidence and self-esteem, and may impact their opportunities for career advancement.
- **Increased risk of disciplinary action or job loss:** If PMDD symptoms interfere with an individual's ability to perform their job duties, it may put them at risk of disciplinary action or job loss. This can further exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression.

By supporting colleagues with PMDD, we can create a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture. This includes being understanding and accommodating of their needs, such as allowing flexible work hours or providing additional support during times when symptoms are particularly severe.

Moreover, by acknowledging and addressing PMDD, we can help break down the stigma surrounding menstruation and menstrual health. This can encourage more open and honest conversations about menstrual health in the workplace, which can lead to improved support and resources for all employees who menstruate.

Overall, supporting colleagues with PMDD is not only compassionate and empathetic, but it can also benefit the entire workplace by promoting inclusivity and better health and well-being for all.



# Barriers to disclosing PMDD at work

There are several barriers that can prevent individuals from disclosing their PMDD at work, including:

- **Stigma:** PMDD is still not widely understood or recognised as a legitimate medical condition, and many people may feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about it. This stigma can be especially pronounced in the workplace, where there may be a culture of downplaying or dismissing mental health concerns<sup>5</sup>.
- **Fear of discrimination:** Some individuals may worry that disclosing their PMDD at work could lead to discrimination or negative consequences, such as being passed over for promotions, losing their job, or being treated differently by colleagues or managers<sup>6</sup>.
- **Lack of awareness or understanding:** Employers and colleagues may not be familiar with PMDD or may not understand the impact it can have on a person's work performance and well-being. This can make it difficult for individuals with PMDD to feel comfortable disclosing their condition and getting the support they need.
- **Limited resources:** Some workplaces may not have adequate resources or policies in place to support employees with PMDD, such as flexible scheduling, accommodations for medical appointments, or access to mental health services.

Overall, these barriers can contribute to a sense of isolation and shame for individuals with PMDD in the workplace. It is important for employers to create a supportive and inclusive work environment where menstrual and mental health concerns, including PMDD, are recognised and accommodated.



<sup>5</sup>Gannon, K., Glover, L., & Abel, N. (2016). Masculinizing and stigmatizing menstruation: An evaluation of low-income women and transgender men. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 18(9), 1077-1090.

<sup>6</sup>Downing, D., & Roush, J. (2018). Accommodating employees with mood disorders. *Journal of Employee Assistance*, 48(2), 16-19



# How to support colleagues with PMDD



Employers can support colleagues with PMDD in several ways, including:

- **Creating a supportive workplace culture:** Employers can foster a workplace culture that promotes open communication, inclusivity, and understanding. This can involve training managers and colleagues to recognise and support employees with PMDD, as well as promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma around menstrual-related conditions.
- **Providing accommodations:** Employers can offer accommodations to support employees with PMDD, such as flexible scheduling to work around their cycle, working from home, adjustments to tasks and workload, and access to mental health resources. This can help employees manage their symptoms and maintain productivity and job satisfaction.
- **Offering paid sick leave or time off:** Employers can provide paid sick leave or time off to employees with PMDD who require time to manage their symptoms. This can reduce stress and anxiety for employees, and help them to feel supported in the workplace.
- **Providing access to healthcare resources:** Employers can offer access to healthcare resources, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs), counselling, and referrals to medical professionals. This can help employees receive appropriate treatment and support for their PMDD symptoms.
- **Being flexible and understanding:** Employers can demonstrate flexibility and understanding in their approach to employees with PMDD. This can involve making accommodations for individual needs, listening to employees' concerns, and being willing to adjust policies and practices to better support employees with PMDD.

Overall, by taking these steps, employers can create a workplace environment that is supportive and inclusive for employees with PMDD.



# What not to do

Employers should avoid certain actions or behaviours when managing PMDD in the workplace, including:

- ⦿ Dismissing or downplaying symptoms: Employers should not dismiss or downplay PMDD symptoms or suggest that they are not a valid reason for time off or accommodations. This can create a hostile work environment and exacerbate an individual's symptoms.
- ⦿ Making assumptions about an individual's abilities: Employers should not make assumptions about an individual's abilities or productivity based on their PMDD diagnosis. Every individual's experience with PMDD is unique, and employers should work with employees to identify accommodations and strategies that work best for them.
- ⦿ Asking for unnecessary medical information: Employers should not ask for unnecessary medical information related to an individual's PMDD diagnosis or treatment. This can violate an individual's privacy and may create a sense of discomfort or shame.
- ⦿ Penalising or discriminating against employees with PMDD: Employers should not penalise or discriminate against employees with PMDD, either directly or indirectly. This can include denying promotions, withholding job opportunities, or making derogatory comments.
- ⦿ Failing to provide accommodations: Employers should not fail to provide accommodations for employees with PMDD. This can create an unfair and unequal workplace and may put individuals at risk of further physical or emotional harm.

Overall, employers should treat PMDD as they would any other medical condition and work with employees to identify appropriate accommodations and support. Employers should also foster a culture of inclusivity, respect, and understanding to support employees with PMDD in the workplace.





# How we can help

At See Her Thrive, we are committed to improving awareness and support for PMDD in the workplace. We offer a range of services to help you create an open, inclusive environment where PMDD is recognised, understood and supported. This includes:

- PMDD Awareness Training for Line Managers and HR Teams to provide the knowledge, skills and confidence to support colleagues with PMDD.
- Educational talks and webinars for your team to raise awareness, encourage open conversations and build psychological safety.
- Policy guidance to ensure the right structural support is in place and existing policies and practices don't penalise employees with PMDD.
- PMDD toolkit to provide your team with vital information, signposting and support.
- Women's Network Facilitation to give colleagues a safe space to talk about PMDD, connect with others and get access to peer support.



Get in touch today at [hello@seeherthrive.com](mailto:hello@seeherthrive.com) to find out more!



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