

SUMMARY

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PERIOD POWER

BY MAISIE HILL



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Summary of “Period Power” by Maisie Hill

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How to make your period a positive thing.

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Introduction

Raise your hand if you've ever felt personally victimized by your period. (And if you appreciate that *Mean Girls* reference!) The bleeding, bloating, and cramping are terrible, but that pain is minimal compared to the casual invalidation that women experience on an almost daily basis. "She's probably just on her period!" has been used to invalidate female emotions for centuries with hormones being cited as a justification for dismissing any display of emotion from a woman. If you are genuinely upset about someone's behavior or attempting to communicate that something is not okay, many people-- most notably men-- are quick to blame your distress on your hormones and use PMS as an excuse to call every woman crazy.

Similarly, the excuse that "women are too emotional" to be in any position of power is frequently touted as a justification for sexism. And once again, periods are named as the culprit. These are only a few of the reasons why periods-- and the stigma that surrounds them-- are so painful to live with. But over the course of this summary, we'll explore why your periods can actually be a source of power and strength.



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Being Moody Isn't Always a Bad Thing!

If you're like most women, you can probably name more than a few times where you've criticized yourself for your appearance or your feelings. You've also probably engaged in a lot of negative self-talk by telling yourself things like, "I'm so fat" or "I'm too sensitive." When this is coupled with the sexist stigma of women being too emotional, it's easy to feel deep guilt and confusion about the mood swings which can make you doubt your own feelings or lash out at people you love. But believe it or not, your mood swings don't make you weak and they don't automatically make you a bad person! In fact, they can actually give you an advantage.

That's because the hormonal ups and downs that women experience are evolutionary upgrades which provide them with increased awareness and enable them to protect themselves and their families. What might once have aided cave women in hunting and gathering can now be used to keep a group of women safe on a night out or snatch your baby up before she runs into traffic. Here's how your hormones are actually helpful: your mood swings occur because of the relationship between your brain's neurotransmitters and your hormones, especially that pesky dominant female hormone, estrogen. For optimum mental health and emotional consistency, you want your estrogen levels to stay relatively high and fairly stable. But right before your period, your estrogen levels drop, which makes you more emotional.

During this period of hormonal fluctuation that's often known as PMS, you might cry or get angry more easily. But it also makes you more emotionally intelligent and able to adapt your feelings to what the situation calls for. This ability to empathize with others' emotions and adjust your emotions in response to an interaction's overall tone actually makes you a great communicator and friend. But while it's happening, it can make you feel pretty lousy. It also means that, because of all these ups and downs, women are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression. But that doesn't mean that your mood swings make you "crazy" or "hysterical" or any of the other

misogynistic labels that are often slapped on women. It also doesn't mean that you need to be medicated so you can shut those feelings away.

However, that's not to invalidate the fact that some people-- men and women alike-- definitely do fight serious battles with depression and anxiety and do find relief from medication. And it's wonderful that anyone struggling with mental health can find a solution that brings them peace! But it's not wonderful when medication is prescribed to people who don't need it. And unfortunately, because our predominantly patriarchal society often takes issue with women expressing any emotion, some psychologists are quick to prescribe antidepressants to shut up any emotional outbursts as soon as a female patient describes anything resembling symptoms of depression. This problem can also arise through the efforts of well-meaning doctors who are not attempting to suppress or objectify their patients, but who simply don't have enough time in their work day to focus long enough on each patient.

However, this lack of time and resources is only one part of the problem. The author observes that modern medicine focuses primarily on men. In fact, many case studies that inform our understanding of mental illness are studies of male patients! And the same is true of an overwhelming percentage of physical illnesses as well. This means that female health problems are vastly understudied and underanalyzed. So, even if they aren't actively contributing to the patriarchal problem themselves, many well-intentioned doctors might lack the adequate medical training necessary to understand and treat their female patients. So, because they are not familiar with the underlying causes of women's health issues, most doctors focus primarily on prescribing quick "fixes" to treat symptoms. Sadly, this issue could often be remedied by simply listening to each female patient and understanding that women having feelings is not always a "problem" that needs to be "fixed."



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Your Periods Can be the Gateway to Profound Emotional Insights

If you've never thought of your periods as being the gateway to a profound emotional experience, think again! By this point, you're likely well-acquainted with the ups and downs that occur during your period, especially the way you can go from feeling like your most amazing self to being convinced that you're fat, ugly, and no one likes you. But as weird as it might sound, these mood swings aren't just cycles of arbitrary torture; in some cases, they can actually facilitate some vital personal growth. But to maximize that growth, you've first got to understand what's going on in your body. And if you struggle to track your cycle, this exploration can show you why keeping up with your body's internal rhythm is more important than you think.

So, first comes the high-school biology refresher. You probably already know that your menstrual cycle occurs in two distinct parts: the follicular phase and the luteal phase. During the follicular phase, a new egg develops in your ovaries and women might experience a strong evolutionary pull to find a mate. That's also why you might feel sexier during the first half of your period. The luteal phase is where you might feel as though all hell is breaking loose. As your estrogen levels drop, your progesterone levels surge, which is why you start to feel moody and depressed. Progesterone is often referred to as "the pregnancy hormone," and if you're a woman who doesn't want to get pregnant, you can certainly understand why pregnancy and depression might be closely linked! All jokes aside, however, progesterone levels rise during the luteal phase of your monthly cycle because this hormone is meant to support and regulate your body during pregnancy.

So, if you were actually pregnant one month (and you planned to continue the pregnancy), you would find the progesterone surge quite helpful. But if you're not pregnant, that onslaught of progesterone just makes you feel weird and weepy. After about 14 days, your uterus finally gets the message that there is no egg to fertilize and the progesterone levels drop. When that

happens, the cells of your uterine lining die and slough off through your vagina in a flow of menstrual blood. (Although thinking of your period as a bunch of dead cells probably doesn't make you feel any better!) While this process occurs, your estrogen levels also take a plunge and this prompts a decrease in your serotonin hormone, which helps regulate your mood and make you happy. In fact, low serotonin is actually one of the leading causes of PMS!

During this part of your cycle, you may experience intense emotions that you're likely to dismiss as being over the top. You might battle irrational thoughts and have to convince yourself that, no, you're not really ugly and no, everyone you love doesn't hate you. And while it's awesome to keep your irrational thoughts under control (and everyone definitely should!), the truth is that many feelings which arise during your period are genuine and actually need to be expressed. Because it's easy to repress your feelings during the rest of the month, the drop in estrogen means that you're more exposed to your feelings. During this time, the feelings that may exist as nagging doubts in the back of your mind are more likely to come to the surface and this can provide you with an important opportunity to explore them. So, although not every feeling you experience during your period is grounded in reality, some are and it can help to listen to them.

The author observes that this acknowledgement is crucial for harnessing the power of your period. Because if you spend all your time thinking, "I'm such a mess!", "I'm so irrational!", or "Why do I feel like this?" you're not really open to profound personal insights. Instead, you're more likely to beat yourself up and dismiss the powerful feelings that are trying to reveal themselves. So, be aware of your cycle and the hormonal fluctuations that cause it. And use this awareness to practice self-compassion. Cut yourself some slack, indulge in positive self-talk, and listen to your feelings.



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Track Your Cycle to Hack Your Period

In the previous chapters, we've explored the purpose of periods and some of the unpleasant side-effects that can occur because of them. We've also investigated a few of the gendered social issues that are tied to female reproductive health and learned about the emotional relationship you have with your period. But now it's time to turn our attention to the ultimate focus of this book: the tips you can implement to reclaim control of your life and your emotions during your menstrual cycle. As we've mentioned in the previous chapters, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and helpless when you're faced with extreme mood swings. Even though your mood swings are natural and nothing to feel bad about, it's never fun to feel like you're on an emotional roller coaster. It's also easy to engage in negative self-talk and berate yourself for being too sensitive or irrational. But none of those things are helpful or productive. So, let's learn a few positive coping strategies that can help you conquer your cycle.

The author believes that tracking your menstrual cycle is key to reclaiming control over your emotions. Although your period only lasts 7-10 days during a healthy cycle, it's important to remember that your menstrual cycle is a constant and ever-changing thing; it isn't limited to the days when you're actually bleeding. As we discussed in the previous chapter, your progesterone levels rise and your serotonin levels drop at least 14 days before your period actually starts. So, a lot of the moodiness you feel occurs well in advance of your period. That's why we have the term PMS or "premenstrual syndrome." So, if you track your cycle, you can be aware of the changes that are occurring in your body at any given time and you can plan accordingly.

The author observes that it may help to think of your menstrual cycle like seasons. You can think of your period as winter: the time where your body hibernates during harsh conditions to prepare for a season of new life and growth. After your period, you emerge into a season that feels something like spring-time; you feel refreshed and renewed. Then you transition to summer (or ovulation) when you continue to feel healthy and free. And then your

body completes its orbit of the cycle, returning to winter again. Thinking of your cycle in terms of these seasons may help you to identify and label what you're feeling. It can also help you to plan for the range of emotions you'll experience at each time.

For example, how many times have you felt as though your emotions didn't match what was happening to you? How often have you felt like crying for no reason or felt depleted of energy even though nothing in your routine had changed? Both of these are classic signs of your body entering the "winter" season, so you might find it helpful to be aware of these cyclical changes and plan accordingly. For example, if you have the flexibility to do so, you might want to plan your work schedule around your cycle so that you're not delivering an important presentation at a time when you know you'll feel weepy and deflated. Similarly, you can try to schedule happy events-- like organizing a party for a friend-- during a time when you know you'll feel most like yourself.

The author believes that "period tracking" apps can help because-- let's be honest-- most of us don't have the time or patience to constantly make notes on a calendar about our periods! Fortunately, period tracking apps can do it for us; just enter the information that's relevant to you and your cycle and the app will handle the rest. Based on her experience as a menstrual health specialist, the author recommends the app Clue as being the best for tracking your cycle. Clue can help you stay in touch with your body and be aware of changes such as hormonal acne, PMS, and period-related headaches! You can also use the app to make little notes about how you're feeling in each cycle. The more data you input, the more you're equipped to understand and prepare for the changes your body will experience.



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Final Summary

Women are often the subjects of sexist discrimination and name-calling because of their periods, but the author wants every woman to know that your menstrual cycle is not a bad thing! It's also important to know that mood swings don't make you crazy or irrational; hormonal fluctuations exist for a reason. They're also more beneficial to women than we realize and they should be celebrated. But it's also easy to feel overwhelmed by your cycle and that's why the author believes it's important to harness the power of your period.

By learning more about your body and employing helpful aids like the period tracking app Clue, you can identify your body's hormonal cycles and appreciate the changes that are taking place throughout menstruation. You can then use this information to plan accordingly and be patient with yourself so you don't feel overwhelmed by your hormones, In this respect, your period can actually be empowering because these insights will help you to understand and appreciate your body.



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