Women and Depression

Throughout the world, rates of depression are greater among females than males, and this gender gap emerges during adolescence and persists throughout adulthood. Until recently, women’s health has centered on the topic of reproductive health, because research focused almost exclusively on biological and anatomical differences distinguishing men and women. Social and behavioral research on gender differences in health now employs multiple disciplinary frameworks and methodologies, and researchers seek to understand the higher rates of specific diseases and disorders in women and men. Symptoms of depression and the diagnosis of depression are more prevalent in women, and research that focuses on biological, psychological, and sociopolitical explanations for this gender gap should now be brought together to better inform efforts at treatment and prevention. Women and Depression is a handbook that serves to move toward a more integrative approach to women’s depression in particular and mental health for all.

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Women and Depression

A Handbook for the Social, Behavioral, and Biomedical Sciences

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This project was inspired by and is dedicated to the most important women in my life – Lisa Keyes, “Nana” Keyes, and Carrie Keyes.

– C. L. M. Keyes

This book is dedicated, with love, to my husband and son, Richard and Seth Snyder.

– S. H. Goodman
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Foreword

– Rosalynn Carter, Director of the Mental Health Program of the Carter Center and former First Lady of the United States of America

For more than 30 years I have been involved in efforts to improve the lives of those with mental illnesses. During that time, unprecedented knowledge has been gained in understanding mental health. The past decade was a particularly exciting time for the field because we achieved greater recognition of the fact that most mental illnesses are biologically based, just as other physical illnesses. We know that, although family and social conditions interact in important ways with biological functioning, mental illnesses are not the result of weak will or misguided parenting, and we have learned that it is best to use approaches for studying and understanding mental illnesses that integrate each of these constructs.

Unfortunately, although much progress has been made in recent years, depression remains one of the most common and disabling mental illnesses. According to the World Health Report 2001, depression was the fourth leading cause of disability for all diseases in 2000 as measured by disability-adjusted life years, or DALYs, and if current trends continue, it is estimated it will become the second leading cause of disability in 2020.

The World Health Organization also reports that the illness is more common in women than in men. These statistics are distressing. Although the gap in depression rates between women and men has been narrowing, it is tragic that so many people continue to suffer unnecessarily. Women and Depression is a truly valuable book because, unlike many of its predecessors, it integrates the latest information from a wide variety of international experts and fields including sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and public health to address all of the issues concerning depression. The handbook provides a comprehensive overview of the most current theories and examines how we can best use this collective knowledge to prevent and treat depression in women.
By examining the interaction among the worlds of medicine and social science, *Women and Depression* will pave the way for greater progress toward understanding, treating, and preventing depression. I believe that the more we learn about the ways biological factors interact with psychological and social conditions, the closer we come to one day being able to live in a world in which depression is no longer the chronic and debilitating disease it is today. It is my hope that the handbook will serve not only as an instructive primer on the current state of knowledge concerning women and depression, but also will provide a model for continued international and interdisciplinary research in all areas of mental illnesses.
Women’s health research has historically centered on the topic of reproductive health. Until recently, research focused almost exclusively on biological and anatomical systems and their differences distinguishing men and women. Today, social and behavioral research on gender differences in health employs multiple disciplinary frameworks and multiple methodologies. Moreover, researchers are now seeking to better understand the causes and mechanisms that explain the higher rates of physical diseases and mental disorders in women and men.

Symptoms of depression and the diagnosis of depression are more prevalent in women. The evidence is now overwhelming that nondepressed individuals function better and are more productive than depressed individuals. Moreover, depression is prevalent, is often comorbid with other psychiatric disorders, recurs throughout the lifespan, is costly to treat, and generates substantial indirect costs to society in terms of lost productivity. Depression, then, has serious consequences whether it affects men or women. However, the fact that it is two to three times more likely to happen to women has become historically troubling because a greater percentage of women today than ever before are participating in the paid labor force in addition to their more traditional roles of raising children and tending to their families. When depression strikes women, it is disabling a central lynchpin in the structure of society.

Why does depression strike in the first place? Research has now identified biological, psychological, and sociopolitical explanations for this gender gap, but researchers and the journals in which they publish on the etiology of depression tend to be segregated into disciplines: psychiatry (biological), clinical psychology (cognitive or interpersonal), and sociology (sociopolitical). Science is reductive, which is at once its strength and a weakness. Reductive science reveals increasingly precise findings, but does so at the cost of breaking the phenomenon into pieces or parts. When it comes to the scientific study of a phenomenon such as depression,
Preface

Reductive science has broken human life down into multiple pieces: biological (genetic, neurohormonal), psychological (emotional, cognitive, behavioral), and sociological (cultural, social conditions, organizations). We are left with a science of pieces of life. Can this Humpty Dumpty be put back together again?

It is our belief that these literatures must be brought together to better inform efforts at treatment and prevention of depression as well as other mental disorders. The aims of this handbook are threefold: (1) to increase the reader’s understanding of the social, psychological, and biomedical exposures that increase women’s vulnerability to depression; (2) to thoroughly review etiological theories and findings of the social, psychological, and biomedical exposures that increase women’s risk for depression and which serve to guide the design and implementation of primary, secondary, and policy and legislative interventions; and (3) to synthesize risk research to critically examine treatment, prevention, and social policy approaches to reducing depression in women.

Unlike other books and edited volumes on the topic of depression or mental illness and women, this handbook is multidisciplinary – including sociology, public health, psychology, and psychiatry. The primary aim of the handbook is to provide a comprehensive viewpoint on the primary question, Why are rates of depression higher in women than in men? so that we may begin to better answer the call to reducing rates of depression and preventing the onset of depression. Although multidisciplinary, neither the research field nor this handbook presents an interdisciplinary perspective on women and depression. A first step toward a future interdisciplinary field will be training graduate students with handbooks such as this one that attempt to provide each discipline’s leading models, theories, and studies. When students and researchers know as much about another discipline’s view of depression as their own, then perhaps a new paradigm of research that is guided by interdisciplinary questions will emerge en masse.

The distinguishing characteristics of this handbook should be its appeal to a broad spectrum of readers. With the rapid growth in the recognition, prevention, and treatment advances in women’s health, this handbook should appeal to health care providers (e.g., nurses and physicians), sociologists, psychologists, health policy experts, women’s studies scholars, and public health practitioners and researchers, as well as students in these fields and cognate areas. Importantly, this handbook can be readily adopted for upper-level undergraduate as well as graduate courses, and it can serve as a supplementary text for more specialized courses on mental health and illness.

– Corey Keyes and Sherryl Goodman, Atlanta, Georgia