The Female Mind: A User’s Guide
The Female Mind:
A User’s Guide

Edited by Kathryn M. Abel and
Rosalind Ramsay

RCPsych Publications
Acknowledgements

This book would not have happened without the commitment and vision of Deborah Hart, former Director of Communications and Policy at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and Sally Dean, expert by experience. Deborah masterminded the book, the last of the trilogy of ‘mind guides’, in which mental health experts share their wisdom with a general readership.
## Contents

Foreword x
Introduction: being female xii

**Part I. Women in perspective**
1. The history of the ‘female mind’ 3
   Lisa Conlan
2. Gender-informed responses to women’s distress 14
   Jennie Williams and Gilli Watson
3. Female sexuality 19
   David T. Evans
4. Growing up female 23
   Margot Waddell

**Part II. Women and society**
5. Poverty, exclusion, debt and women 31
   Jed Boardman
6. Arranged marriage 38
   Chetna Kang
7. Girls at risk 41
   Trish O’Donnell
8. Domestic abuse 51
   Roxane Agnew-Davies and Louise M. Howard
9. Women and the criminal justice system 57
   Annie Bartlett

**Part III. Women and their environment**
10. Emotional well-being and staying well 65
    Kamaldeep Bhui and Zenobia Nadirshaw
11. Sensitive motherhood 71
    Helen Minnis and Philip Wilson
CONTENTS

12. Religion and spirituality  77
   Julia Head

13. Linking physical and mental health in women  83
   Irene Cormac

14. Obesity  88
   John Morgan

15. Women and sleep  91
   Neil Stanley

16. Women and pain  98
   George Ikkos and Susan Lingwood

17. Bereavement, loss and grief  104
   Lynne M. Drummond

Part IV. Women and specific disorders

18. Depression and other mood disorders  113
   Paul Blenkiron

19. Anxiety disorders  123
   Lynne M. Drummond

20. Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder  128
   Nuri Gené-Cos

21. The dangers of rumination  135
   Raj Persaud

22. Obsessive–compulsive disorder  139
   Lynne M. Drummond

23. Eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder  146
   Sandeep Ranote, Andrea Phillipou, Susan Rossell and David Castle

24. Psychosexual disorders  155
   Jennifer Davies-Oliveira and Leila Frodsham

25. Personality disorders: risks and recovery  161
   Gwen Adshead

26. Self-harm  167
   Alys Cole-King and Sue Sibbald

27. Women and addiction  178
   Sally Marlow

28. Autism spectrum disorder  183
   Helen Pearce

29. Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder  188
   Gaëlle Slater and Helen Crimlisk
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Psychotic illness</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Alison R. Yung, Kathryn M. Abel and Sarah Cornick</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Postnatal depression and postpartum psychosis</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Lucinda Green and Liz McDonald</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Living longer: normal age-related changes, dementia and depression</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Nori Graham and Iracema Leroi</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part V. Women and treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>What women want from medication</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ann Mortimer</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>What women want from services: a patient’s perspective</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sally Dean</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Complementary and alternative therapies</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ursula Werneke</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contributors 238
Index 243
Foreword

Until I reached my early 20s, I was happy to ignore the social realities of being a woman. As a child, I had an anxious temperament and I understood that a lot would be expected of me as an adult. It’s no secret that the 21st-century woman is supposed to ‘do it all’. On top of the career, relationships, babies and having the perfect body (cheers for that), women are also expected to be the caregivers, the domestic goddesses and the ones who remember everybody’s birthdays. Never mind if you have the flu or your period is giving you grief, those plates mustn’t stop spinning, and perish the thought that you drop one. I was intimidated, but thought that if other women could do it without complaint, then surely I could, too.

By the age of 24, that anxious ‘temperament’ of mine morphed into a full-blown anxiety disorder, eventually triggering a breakdown. I felt like a failure – everybody else seemed able to cope with life just fine, so what was wrong with me? I felt on edge constantly, tortured by panic attacks and bouts of insomnia. I was lost.

In my quest for knowledge about my condition, I devoured a great deal of reading material. Unfortunately, I only understood around 9% of what I read, and the dictionary became my best friend. The more I read, the more frustrated I became. It was all so complicated and scary. That’s why I started my blog, *We’re All Mad Here*, to write about mental health without the use of unexplained medical jargon.

In short, what I was looking for was this book.

I’ll admit that when I was originally approached to write the foreword I rolled my eyes. ‘Here we go again,’ I thought, ‘another stuffy academic textbook that only PhD students will understand’. However, within minutes of reading the
first chapter I knew I was mistaken. The Female Mind: A User’s Guide is a hugely important publication. It reads like a friendly guided tour of a woman's brain and covers a wide range of conditions. Basically, name it and it’s there! There’s even a fascinating chapter on the history of the female mind and gender inequalities. After reading Part 1, I felt revolutionised. Is it any wonder that women are more likely to develop some mental illnesses? We deal with a lot of rubbish!

Furthermore, this book is easy to understand. Hurrah! I can’t believe there’s finally a mental health book for the general reader – one that’s interesting as well as informative.

Whether you’re dealing with mental illness yourself, or caring for someone else, this book is for you. Packed full of information, case studies (called ‘stories’ here) and useful tips, it’s a book you can dip in and out of, depending on your needs, or read in one go.

Hats off to the many authors; you’re all fantastic and I wish The Female Mind: A User’s Guide had been around 10 years ago.

Claire Eastham
Introduction: being female

What does it mean to be female? When we ask people this question, they all have an answer to it, in some form or another. And in some ways, we all know that the answer will depend on every individual's particular context or place in the world and, indeed, their age.

But never has there been a time when the question of sex or gender is more in play. Some people do not wish to describe their gender as female or male. We need to understand the meaning of new terms like 'gender fluidity' where a person likes to describe themselves as a mix of girl and boy, identifying differently depending on time and place.

By contrast perhaps, asexuality is used to describe a state in which sexual orientation is characterised by a persistent lack of sexual attraction towards any gender.

Given this change in the landscape from a simple binary idea of being female or being male, and of gender or sexual identity, you may well ask how we can produce a book entitled *The Female Mind* with any degree of confidence.

We now know that being female is a very active process. In all mammals, the developing brain becomes actively masculinised so that the adult brain and adult reproductive behaviour are consistent with each other and with the sex cells (differentiated gonads) of the individual body. And although brain is thought of as being ‘destined to be female’ unless exposed to male hormones (testosterone) during pregnancy, we are now discovering that becoming female is not just a passive result of not having testes and not being exposed to testosterone. In fact, being female is a very active process indeed. To be female, the ‘male genetic programme’ has to be actively suppressed in females by a female-specific pattern of
switching genes on and off by a process called methylation. Even more surprising perhaps, this brain feminisation is maintained by active suppression of masculinisation throughout life. More recent work suggests that this process can be influenced by a range of environmental effects (e.g. smoking/nutritional/stress) to a greater or lesser extent.

What does it mean for mental health?

Being female is not just about brain. Sex differences in the perception of stress and the body’s response to it have all been well documented and may in part explain some of the differences in rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety-related difficulties. But, as we shall see in later chapters, being female (physically weaker and smaller) also means we have widely different experiences to men: greater poverty, less autonomy and power in the world, more suppression of desires, more sexual abuse and more inter-partner violence as a start. All these phenomena are likely to have an important influence on the female brain, as well as its behaviour, and to be responsible for some of the differences we see in rates of depression across women’s lives. From a biological view, these negative life experiences act in much the same way as other environmental effects. And that’s before we begin to consider the important socio-cultural, biological and psychological influences of periods, pregnancy or perimenopause.

We have invited a host of authors to cover all those topics, and more, in this book. We invite you to join us on this fascinating journey to discover – what is the female mind?

Kathryn M. Abel & Rosalind Ramsay