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MAJOR FINDINGS ON WOMEN SUFFERING DEPRESSION

The same signals in the brain that hundreds of years ago in early civilizations triggered the survival instincts of women to protect themselves and their young is putting women at greater risk of developing anxiety and depression in modern society.

Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director of Black Dog Institute, used this example to explain the latest research findings confirming women are more likely to get depressed than men.

The Black Dog institute has recently published two studies:

In one of the studies titled “From Diathesis to Dimorphism: The Biology of Gender Differences in Depression”, Professor Parker said that, following puberty, women are more likely than men to experience a “limbic system activation” response to certain stressful situations. (The “limbic system” is a set of interconnected structures on the inner side of the cerebral hemisphere, and controls the exchange between the body or self and the external world. It is the base for a range of instinctual behaviours that, in effect, promote human survival.)

Such a gender-based difference would have had evolutionary advantage to hunter-tribesmen communities when women were required to care for children while men would hunt away from home base in search of food,” Professor Parker said.

“The greater limbic cortex activation would have had the advantage of driving vigilant defence mechanisms in women. That would have assisted women in their survival and to protect those under their care - a mechanism that would not have been of advantage to the male hunters.”

Professor Parker said that such a gender-based difference may no longer be relevant in today's society but it did not stop the basic biological difference being expressed.

He said Black Dog Institute researchers view greater "limbic cortex activation" in women as a constructive mechanism - one that is non-pathological and one that has the potential to assist survival and other positive outcomes.

Unfortunately, the downside is that it puts women at greater risk of developing anxiety and depression.

Professor Parker said that up until now community studies undertaken in numerous countries around the world have consistently reported that women are two to four times more likely to rate as having experienced a lifetime episode of depression.

This consistent finding, he said, had generally been interpreted in "pathological ways", with the inference being that women are more likely, of necessity, to develop depression.

"With our Australian research we have pursued alternative models and the results most certainly change the way we look at the causes of anxiety and depression in women, Professor Parker said.

In the second study conducted by Black Dog Institute "Is the Female Preponderance in Major Depression Secondary to a Gender Difference in Specific Anxiety Disorders?" researchers confirmed the initial increase in depression in women compared to men occurred at the time of puberty.

What the researchers have also identified for the first time is a second period (between 45 and 50 years) when the female rate once again climbed rapidly above that for males.

Further information about these studies can be obtained from Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director, Black Dog Institute (02) 9382 4372, and from Ian Dose, Public Relations Officer, Black Dog Institute (02) 9382 4368 or (M) 0419 618 606.

Download research papers mentioned in this press release:

[From Diathesis to Dimorphism](#)

[Is the Female Preponderance](#)