

Mental Health Disparities: Women's Mental Health

Gender Differences in Mental Disorders

Recent research has identified disparities between women and men in regard to risk, prevalence, presentation, course, and treatment of mental disorders.

Rates of Mental Health Conditions - Each year, 1 in 5 women in the United States has a mental health problem such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or an eating disorder.⁵

Research - Although research shows that women and men have similar rates of mental health problems, the types of mental conditions may differ.⁶

Depression - The most common mental health problem in women is depression. Twice as many

women experience depression in their lifetime than men. Approximately 1 in 9 women 18 and older have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.⁷

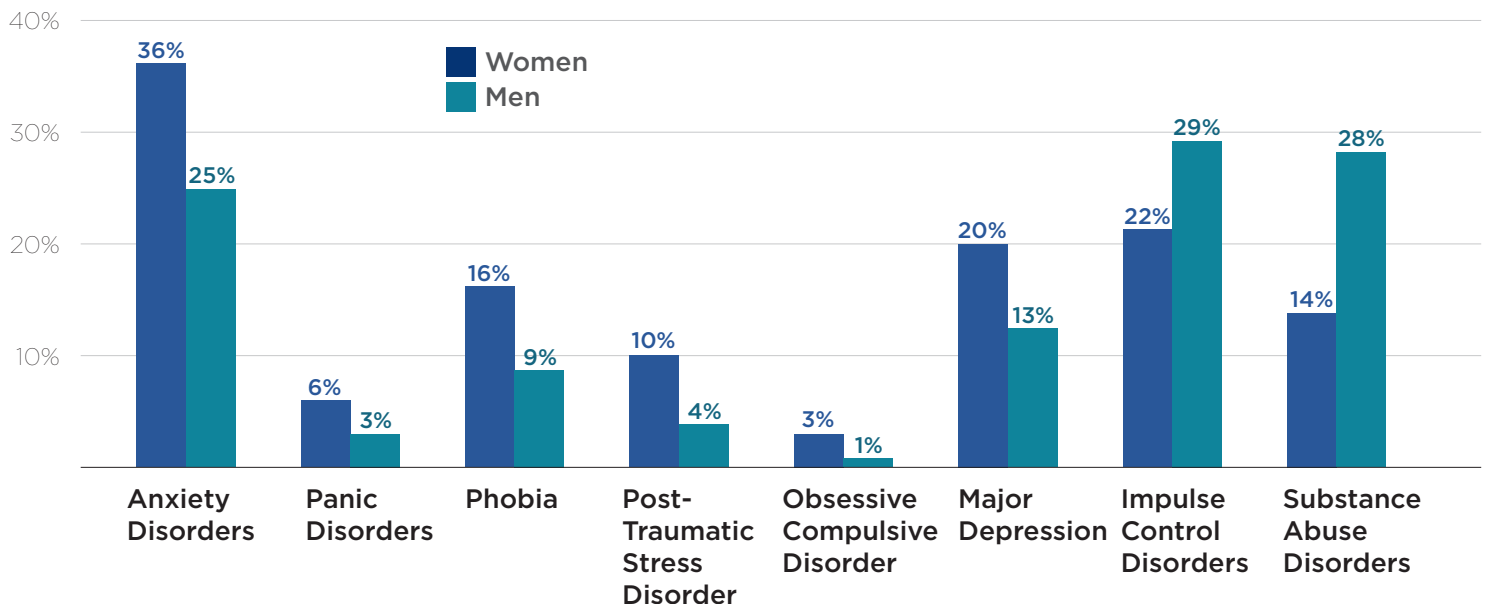
PTSD - Compared with men, women are twice as likely to experience PTSD. Women are more likely to have hypervigilance, feel depressed, and have trouble feeling emotions; men are more likely to feel angry and have problems with alcohol or drugs.⁹

Anxiety - Women are twice as likely as men to experience generalized anxiety disorder or panic disorder.⁹

Suicide - Women attempt suicide more often than men; however, men are four times more likely to die by suicide.¹⁰

Eating Disorders - Approximately 85%-95% of

Rates of Mental Health Disorders in Women and Men



Source: National Comorbidity Survey Replication, 2005

From HHS, Office of Women's Health. Women's Mental Health: What it Means to You.

people with anorexia nervosa or bulimia and 65% of people with binge eating disorder are women.¹¹

Schizophrenia – Rates of schizophrenia are similar among men and women. Schizophrenia generally appears in women in their late twenties or early thirties; and in men, from late teens to early twenties.¹²

Alcohol use – Women are less likely to experience alcohol use disorder than men.¹³

Risk Factors for Mental Health Problems in Women

Women disproportionately experience the following risk factors for common mental disorders than men.

- Women earn less than men. Women who are full time workers earn about one-fourth less than male counterparts in a given year.¹
- The poverty rate for women aged 18 to 64 is 14.2% compared with 10.5% for men. For women aged 65 and older the poverty rate is 10.3%, while the poverty rate for men aged 65 and older is 7.0%.¹
- Victims of violence: About 1 in 3 women have experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.²
- An estimated 65% of caregivers are women. Female caregivers may spend as much as 50% more time providing care than male caregivers.³

Gender Differences in Seeking/Receiving Mental Health Services

According to a study from the World Health Organization, there are differences in the way women and men seek and use mental health services. There are also differences in the treatment provided.

- Women are more likely to be prescribed psychotropic medications than men.

- Women are more likely to seek help from and disclose mental health problems to their primary health care physician; men are more likely to seek out a mental health specialist.
- Women are less likely than men to disclose problems with alcohol use to their health care provider.
- Women are reluctant to disclose a history of violent victimization unless physicians ask about it directly.
- Women are more likely to be prescribed psychotropic medications than men.
- Physicians are more likely to diagnose depression in women compared with men, even when both genders have identical symptoms or similar scores on standardized measures of depression.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Care Services Among Women

Key barriers to mental health treatment for women:

- Economic barriers – lack of insurance/cost (including premiums and copays)
- Lack of awareness about mental health issues, treatment options, and available services
- Stigma associated with mental illness
- Lack of time/related support (time off work, child care, transportation)
- Lack of appropriate intervention strategies including integration of mental health and primary health care services

To learn about best practices for treating diverse populations and to get answers to your questions by leading psychiatrists, please visit APA's Cultural Competency webpage at <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency>.

Footnotes

- ¹ SAMHSA. 2014. "Past Year Mental Disorders among Adults in the United States: Results from the 2008-2012 Mental Health Surveillance Study." CBHSQ DATA Review. samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DR-N2MentalDis-2014-1/Web/NSDUH-DR-N2MentalDis-2014.htm
- ² American Psychiatric Association. "Best Practice Highlights Female Patients." psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/treating-diverse-patient-populations/working-with-women-patients
- ³ SAMHSA. 2016. National Survey on Drug Use and Health 2015.
- ⁴ Desai HD and Jann MS. 2000. Major depression in women: a review of the literature. *Journal of the American Pharmacists Association*, 40(4):525-37.
- ⁵ National Center for PTSD. 2015. Women, Trauma, and PTSD. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/women/women-trauma-and-ptsd.asp>.
- ⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2015. Fatal Injury Reports. www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.html
- ⁷ National Institutes of Health. 2008. Males and Eating Disorders. *Medline Plus*, 3(2):18. www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/spring08/articles/spring08pg18.html
- ⁸ National Institute of Mental Health. 2015. Mental Health Information: Schizophrenia. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/schizophrenia/index.shtml
- ⁹ American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.
- ¹⁰ US Census. 2016. Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2015. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-158.html>
- ¹¹ CDC. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey— State Report. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/summaryreports.html#3>.
- ¹² Family Caregivers Alliance. 2015. Women and Caregiving: Facts and Figures. <https://caregiver.org/women-and-caregiving-facts-and-figures>.

This educational resource was prepared by the Division of Diversity and Health Equity. Updated and reviewed by Misty Richards, M.D., Maureen Sayres Van Niel, M.D., and the Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities.