

# Irritability: It's Under-Rated



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# Irritability: It's Under-Rated

- Definition, DSM-IV, Medline
- Irritability and the spectrum of Female-Specific Disorders
- Pregnancy and Postpartum
- Rating Irritability: A New Measure
- Treatment Strategies
- Questions to be Answered

## Irritability: 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC - 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD

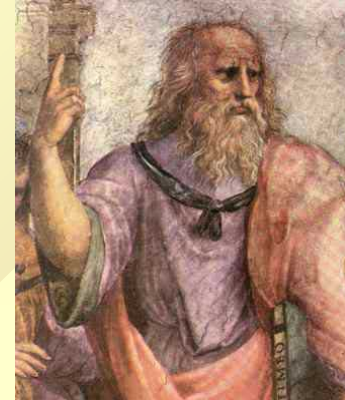
L. *Irritabilitas*: **proneness to anger**

**Plato (427 - 347 BC)**

human soul: reason, irritability, appetite

**Claudius Galen (130 - 201 AD)**

yellow bile ↔ choleric temperament (hot tempered)



Oxford Latin Dictionary 1982; L. Apuleius 2nd c. AD

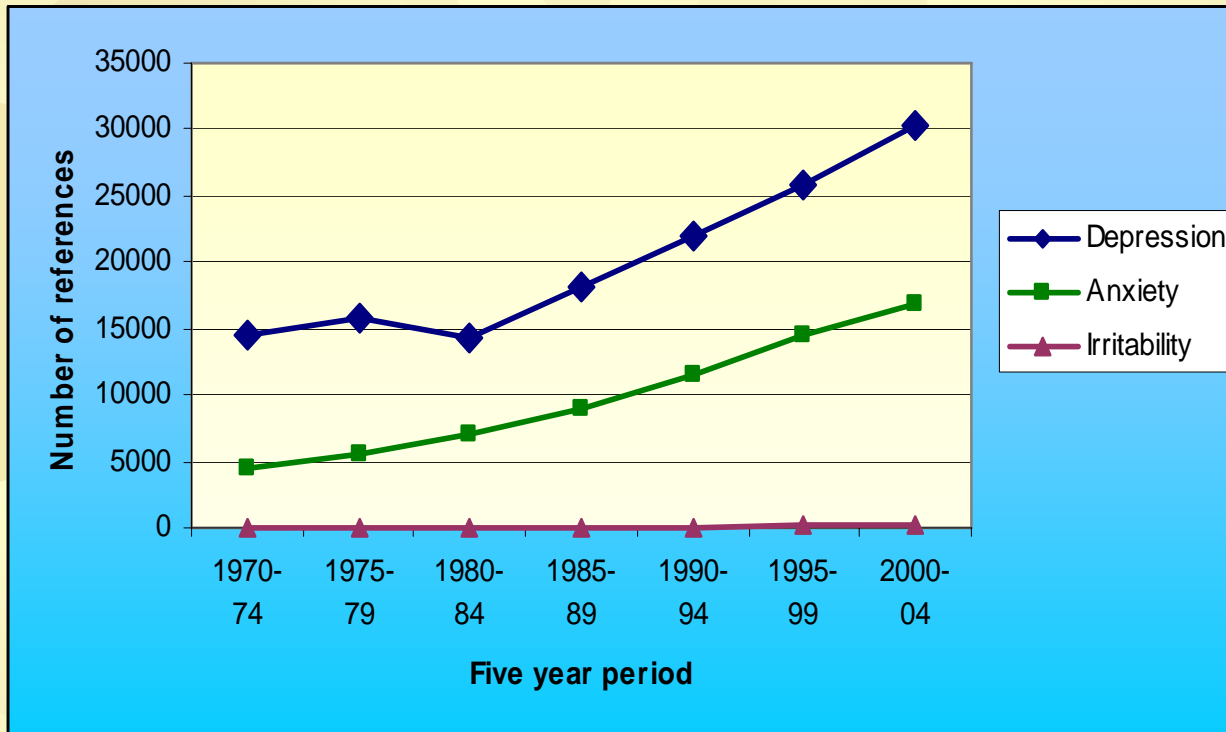
## 1957: Buss Durkee Hostility Inventory

"A readiness to explode with negative affect at the slightest provocation. This includes quick temper, grouchiness, exasperation, and rudeness."

- aggressive **attitude**
- irritability is 1 of 7 subscales which describe **Hostility**

Buss & Durkee 1957

# Medline [MeSH] entries 1970-2004



2008:

47,302

36,837

593

# DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000)



Irritability: an associated feature of or criterion for other mental or physical conditions

- mood/anxiety/psychotic disorders
  - MDD with Irritability (R Perlis et al 2005)
  - Bipolar Disorder (F Benazzi & H Akiskal 2005)
- substance-related disorders
- general medical conditions
- personality disorders
- intermittent explosive disorder

## Gender Differences: Men

*“He’s on a timer.” [wife]. . . . “I never saw his top teeth.” [son]*

- Inappropriate
- Intimidating
- Tense
- Critical
- “Pumped up”
- **Silence**
- Natural
- Common
- May warrant treatment



## Gender Differences: Women

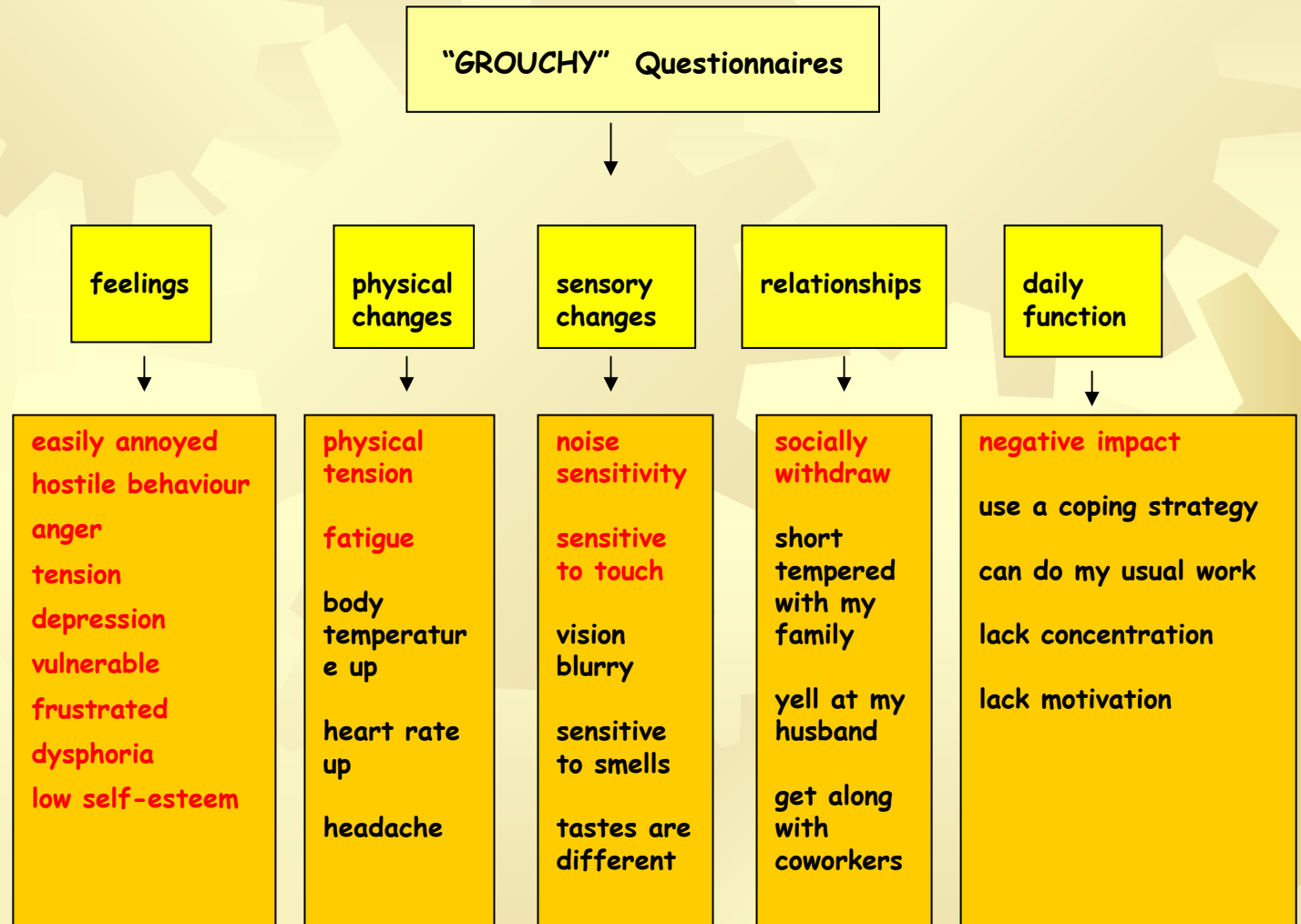
*“I’m hostile to the world, acting like Dracula, and completely out of control. The least little thing upsets me and I don’t want to make decisions!”*

- Unfeminine
- Unattractive
- Inappropriate
- Off-putting
  
- Suffer
- **Silence**
  
- Natural
- Common
- May warrant treatment



Born et al 2008 in press

# Qualitative Analysis of "Irritability" (N=132 females) using NUD\*IST NVivo



# Spectrum of Female-Specific Disorders

## Irritability: Animal Studies

irritable aggression in female animals tends to be cyclical and associated with the reproductive phases

- Wistar rats
- Yellow baboons

K.E. Moyer 1976; G. Housefater & B. Skoblick 1985; H.-P. Ho et al 2001

# Spectrum of Female-Specific Disorders

menarche



menopause

prevalence

<b>PMS*</b> (mod-sev)	15%-21%
<b>PMDD*</b>	3%-8%
<b>Baby Blues*</b>	50%-80%
<b>Postpartum Depression</b>	12%-15%
<b>Postpartum Psychosis</b>	0.1%
<b>Perimenopause*</b>	up to 70% of women report irritability

\*irritability is a cardinal feature

# Current Diagnostic Labels

postpartum blues

postpartum depression (PPD)\*

postpartum psychosis

postpartum anxiety disorders\*

post-traumatic stress disorder

adjustment disorder

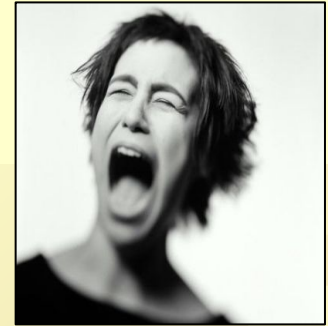
bereavement

irritability

First onset postpartum, or Postpartum presentation of an underlying disorder

\*frequently comorbid

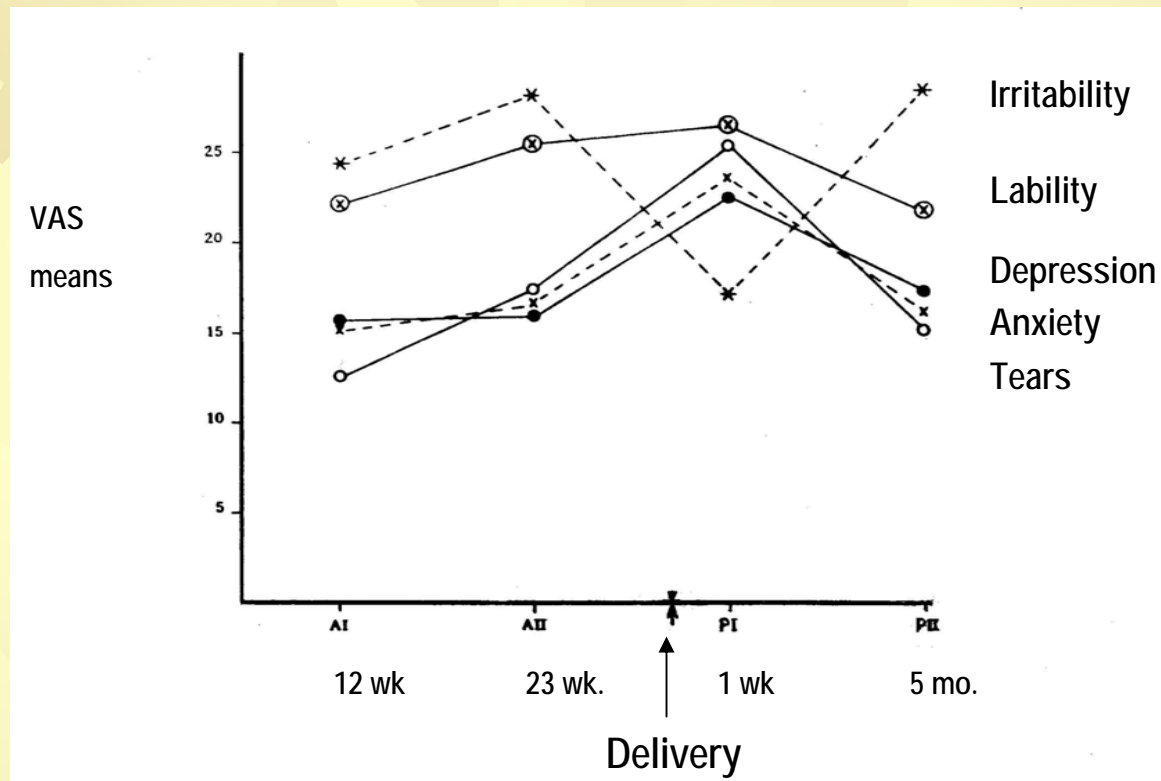
# Perinatal Irritability



- Typically, onset in the late 2nd trimester
- May be chronic in nature
- With or without symptoms of depression
- Can intensify after parturition
- **May signal another medical issue** (e.g., gestational diabetes)
- At most extreme: “anger attack”
  - Ego-dystonic
  - Remorse, guilt
  - May be associated with treatment non-adherence

O Mammen et al 1999; K Dalton 2001; L Born et al 2003; T Field et al 2003

# Pregnancy to Postpartum: An Emotional Picture



Cox JL et al 1983

N=230

# Pregnancy to Postpartum

Recent research has shown:

- Antepartum & postpartum depression can occur independently of each other
- Though, there is mounting evidence that the onset of some “postpartum” emotional disorders begin during pregnancy
  - Depression → PPDepression
  - Anxiety → PPAxiety
  - Anxiety → PPDepression

Heron et al 2004; Rich-Edwards et al 2006; Dietz et al 2007; Lee et al 2007

# Perinatal Irritability

## Case Example: "Pam"

- 34 yr old, married; has 3 children from her first marriage
- 6 mo. postpartum; is breastfeeding (menses has not yet returned)
- Irritable mood onset: late 2<sup>nd</sup> trimester; intensified after delivery; says *"it's like having PMS all the time"* and *"I'm not depressed!"* (EPDS = 10)
  - Everything bothers her; impatient; quick to anger; yells; dysphoria; chronic
- Marital conflict
- At 9 mo. postpartum, stops breastfeeding; menses returned
  - **Meets criteria for PMDD**

# Baby Blues or "Baby Grouchies"?

- Postpartum Blues is generally perceived to be a period of emotional lability after delivery with frequent crying episodes
- One prospective study has shown that ratings of irritability rise from day 2 postpartum, peak about day 8, and remain steady for the next two weeks
- Ratings of depression, crying, anxiety, & mood lability, on the other hand, rise during the first five days after delivery and then taper in the days thereafter

Kendell RE et al 1981

# Anger Attack and PPD

- Mammen and colleagues found, in a sample of pregnant and postpartum women (N=50) referred to a perinatal psychiatry clinic, that 60% of subjects endorsed "anger attacks" at intake.
  - Anger attacks were defined as becoming angry and enraged with other people, in a way that was thought to be excessive or inappropriate to the situation.
- The findings by Mammen and colleagues that anger attacks are typically "ego-dystonic" and associated with guilt, worry and regret, allude to the stigma associated with women regarding anger.

Mammen OK et al. 1999

## Puerperal Psychosis

- Irritability is also part of the clinical picture of puerperal psychosis, which occurs in about 1 out of 1000 women in the days after parturition.
- Descriptions of irritability, anger, even "Medusa-like rage" have been recorded in case reports dating back more than four centuries.

Brockington I. *Motherhood and Mental Health*. 1996

# Reasons for Non-Disclosure of Irritability

- Women - Irritability - Anger dilemma
  - Meaning = weakness or emotional instability, pathological
  - "Masculine"
  - Actively discouraged & suppressed by society
    - women learn early in life **not to show** irritability & anger and not to discuss it
- Displays of anger by men are regarded as normal
  - Evidence of strength, assertion

# Relevance

- Physical & psychological impact on maternal well-being
  - Parenting practices
- Impact on maternal-infant attachment
- Impact on family unit
- Psychological & behavioural sequelae for child: "first adverse life event"
  - Infants as young as 3 months are able to "detect" ~~depression~~ irritability in their mothers



MK Weinberg & EZ Tronick 1996; 1998; DJ Newport et al 2002;  
KT McLearn et al 2006; A Josefsson et al 2007

# Barriers to Detection

- Perinatal mental illness is under-recognized & under-diagnosed
- Pregnancy or postpartum? OR symptoms related to depression?
  - e.g., sleep disturbance, fatigue
- Screening for PPD (only)
- Limitations of current DSM-IV classification system
  - Postpartum onset specifier for Mood Disorder only
  - no mention of pregnancy
- Limitations of existing specific (depression) symptom scales
  - EPDS (Cox)
  - PDSS (Beck)
  - Baby Blues (Stein)

# Preliminary Studies - Irritability

- it is an all-encompassing phenomenon
- burden of illness is profound
- male-female differences
- social stigma
- clinical under-recognition & reporting
- exclusion from popular mood rating scales
- existing measures of irritability are not reliable & valid in women

# A New Female-Specific Measure of Irritability

## Rationale & Purpose:

- **encourage inquiry & evaluation** of a prominent, but under-recognized phenomenon
- Increased **specificity** in clinical assessments
- **Discriminate** between patients w.r.t. mood symptomatology
- Assist clinical **decision-making** regarding treatment

# Rating Irritability: A New Measure

## Population

- Women, 20-60 years
- PMS, **Pregnancy and Postpartum**, Perimenopause patients at an outpatient psychiatry hospital clinic
- Healthy controls: no current medical condition, use of prescribed or over-the-counter medications
- English language fluency

# IRRITABILITY: Item Domains

core  
aspects

- Annoyance
- Anger
- Tension
- Hostile behaviour
- Sensitivity

burden  
of  
illness

- Frustration
- Physical symptoms
- Depression/Dysphoria
- Vulnerability
- Self-Esteem
- Social activities
- Daily activities

# IRRITABILITY SCALE - Self Rating

*Please mark a "✓" in the box beside each item which best describes how you have been feeling in the past week:*

		most of the time	often	some of the time	not at all
1	I have been feeling mad	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I have been feeling ready to explode	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I have yelled at others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I enjoyed being touched	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	I have been easily flying off the handle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



# A New Measure of Irritability

## Discussion

### Strengths

- The new measure seems to reflect overall clinical impressions & unique clinical situations
- It is reliable in clinically homogenous populations
- Impact on day-to-day clinical practice
- A useful clinical tool, & a starting point for further exploration of irritability as a phenomenon

### Limitations

- Convenience samples
- Test sample size

# Treatment Strategies

## Interview or Meeting

- Expect resistance and ambivalence
  - "I'm fine" is common
- Give statements indicating sympathetic and attentive listening
- Ask about her feelings, including depression, anxiety, and **irritability**
  - Women are relieved to be asked
- Give statements of **encouragement** and support
  - *E.g., "some women feel irritable or short-fused, it's not uncommon, and it's ok for you to tell me if you feel this way"*

# Treatment Strategies - Conservative

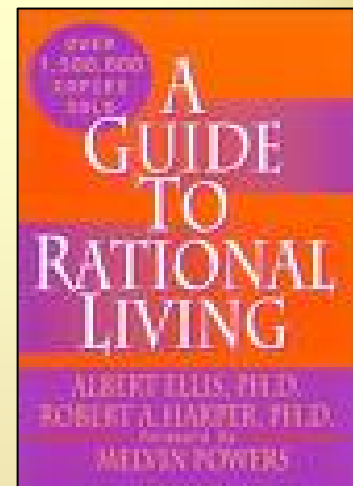
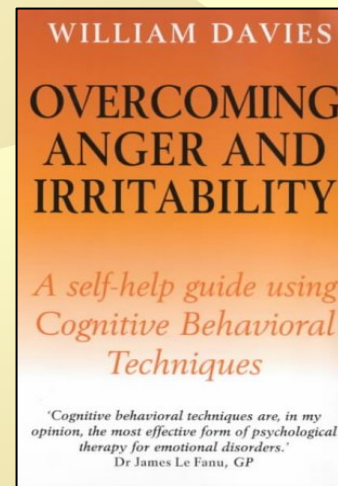
- ❑ Daily charting  
([http://www.moooddisorders.on.ca/pdf/mood\\_diary%20.pdf](http://www.moooddisorders.on.ca/pdf/mood_diary%20.pdf))
- ❑ Rule out other medical conditions
- ❑ Lifestyle Modifications
  - sleep
  - diet
  - exercise
  - role function

# Treatment Strategies - Psychotherapeutic

**Aim: reduce the triggers for annoyance,  
frustration, anger**

Interpersonal Psychotherapy

Cognitive Therapy



# Treatment Strategies - Pharmacologic

- **Magnesium** 125-300 mg tid + at bedtime  
(Eby & Eby 2006 - Major depression)
- **Vitamin B6** 50-100mg/d (Wyatt et al 1999 - PMS)
- **SSRIs alone OR added to a mood stabilizer**
  - **Fluoxetine**  
(Fava et al 1996 – major depression w/ anger attacks)
  - **Sertraline**  
(Fava et al 1997 - atypical depression, dysthymia w/ anger attacks)
  - **Citalopram + Lithium or Valproic Acid**  
(Mammen et al 2004 – bipolar depression w/ anger attacks)

## Additional Information:

Born L & Steiner M.

**Irritability: The Forgotten Dimension of Female-specific Mood Disorders**

Archives of Women's Mental Health 1999;2:153-167

Born L, Koren G, Lin E, & Steiner M.

**A New Female-specific Measure of Irritability**

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Thank You!

Holly Thurlow, PHN

Dr. Meir Steiner

Dr. Gideon Koren

All of the women whom  
I have had and continue to  
have the privilege  
& pleasure working with.

