
Hysteria through history



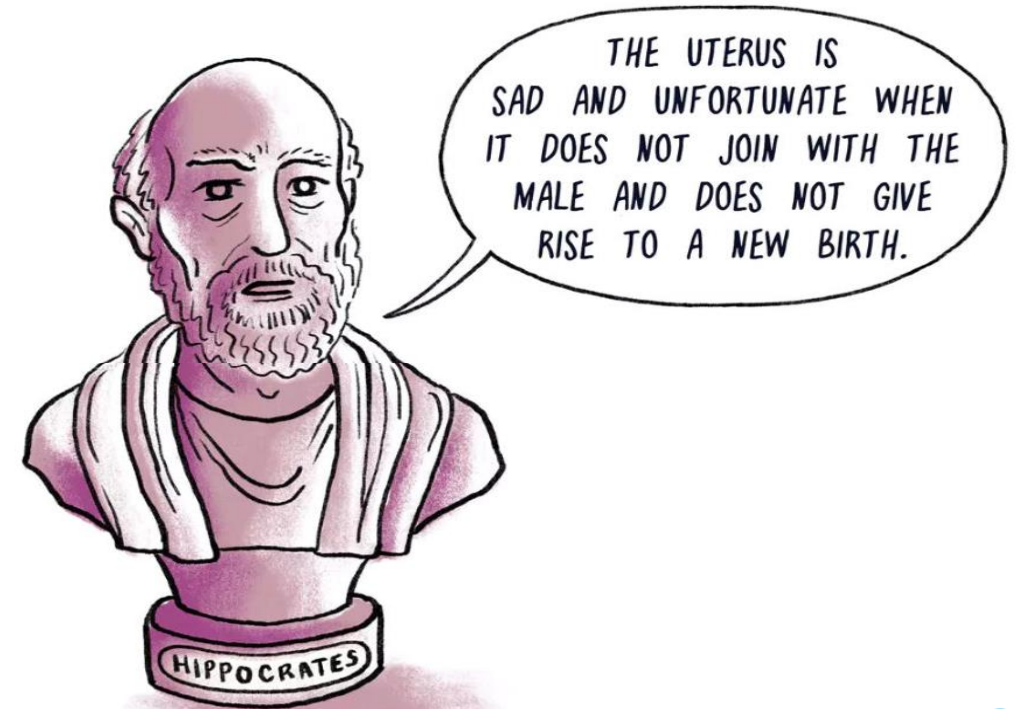
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She/her
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What is hysteria?

- Shortness of breath
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Fainting
- Amnesia
- Paralysis
- Pain
- Spasms
- Convulsive fits
- Vomiting
- Deafness
- Bizarre movements
- Seizures
- Hallucinations
- Inability to speak

Ancient world

- Described in Egypt in 1900BCE as a 'wandering womb' that caused tonic-clonic seizures and the sense of suffocation
- The term 'hysteria' was first used in 5th century BCE by Hippocrates, derived from the Greek word for uterus.



The Nib

Ancient world

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- The term ‘hysteria’ was first used in 5th century BCE by Hippocrates, derived from the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*
- Galen, a Roman physician in 2nd century CE, wrote, “I have examined many hysterical women, some stuporous, others with anxiety attacks... the disease manifests itself with different symptoms, but always refers to the uterus.”

Middle ages and Renaissance

- In the Middle Ages, hysteria was sometimes believed to be the result of demonic influences
- Starting in the Renaissance, medical explanations again took precedence
- Various physicians proposed that hysteria was a neurological or emotional ailment, rather than a physical or spiritual one
- Thomas Sydenham, an English physician, wrote in 1681, “Women, except for those who lead a hardy and robust life, are rarely quite free from [hysteria].”

19th century

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 - He believed it was caused by neurological damage, either hereditary or due to injury
- Sigmund Freud, an Austrian psychoanalyst, believed hysterical symptoms were physical expressions of psychological suffering due to traumatic sexual experiences as a child
 - Freud stated hysteria could occur in men as well as women, and in fact diagnosed himself with hysteria

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Modern hysteria

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Borderline personality disorder
- Conversion disorder
- A third more common in women
- Twice as common in women
- Three times as common in women
- Four times as common in women

Misdiagnosis

- A 1965 follow up study on patients who had been diagnosed with hysteria in the 1950s showed that more than 60% had been found to have an organic neurological disease such as a brain tumour
- Women with chronic pain conditions are more likely to be misdiagnosed with mental health conditions than men
- Women are more likely to receive anti-anxiety medications than men when they come to a hospital with pain
- Women take significantly longer than men to be diagnosed with everything from cancer to heart attacks to autoimmune diseases
- Misdiagnosis with the wrong disease increases the time to get the right diagnosis. A physical misdiagnosis doubles the time, a psychological misdiagnosis can increase it up to 14 times longer

Other examples

- Homosexuality
 - 1952, DSM-I listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance
 - 1987, homosexuality completely removed from the DSM
 - 1990, the WHO declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Gender dysphoria
 - 2019, the WHO removed 'gender identity disorder' as a mental illness
 - In the UK, a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is still required to legally transition

Any questions?

Discussion prompts

- Do you have personal experiences of or know a woman who has had been told her symptoms are ‘all in her head’?
- When is the last time you heard a woman described as hysterical? How about a man?

Further reading

- [Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health](#)
- [The Dark History of Hysteria](#)
- [The History of Hysteria: Sexism in Diagnosis](#)
- [Women more often misdiagnosed because of gaps in trust and knowledge](#)
- ['Everybody was telling me there was nothing wrong'](#)
- [Women and pain: Disparities in experience and treatment](#)
- [Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality](#)
- [How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease: An Interview with Jonathan Metzl](#)
- [Gender Recognition Act](#)