Irritable male syndrome? [1]

Dear Alice,

I've noticed that every time I get my period, my boyfriend immediately starts acting uncharacteristically emotional, even before I do anything to let him know I'm on my period! Does he have irritable male syndrome, and is it possible for it to sync with my period?

? Synced and confused

Answer

Dear Synced and confused,

It's terrific that a) you are keyed into your boyfriend's mood changes and b) that you are concerned enough to try and figure out what is causing them. That said, it's unlikely that he is experiencing what has been referred to as "irritable male syndrome". The term, coined in 2001, was used to describe irritability, nervousness, and depression in males who experience a drop in testosterone. However, this was observed at the end of the mating seasons in male animals (not humans) that breed annually. The "syndrome" has been touted as a male condition similar to female pre-menstrual syndrome, but there is a lack of evidence to suggest that the condition exists in humans. To the issue of your menstrual period's influence on your boyfriend, research has shown that menstruation does not affect male testosterone levels in any significant way. Though these biological factors may not give reason for your partner's emotions, it's possible that there's a more psychological explanation at play.

While your menstrual period (biologically speaking) may not be directly influencing your boyfriend's mood at that time of the month, your inclination to connect the two isn't exactly far off. Interestingly, there is documented evidence of psychological and even physical symptoms syncing up among both female and male partners during pregnancy and the post-partum period. It has been well documented that men can be affected by their pregnant partners in a condition called Couvade syndrome [2]. Also called sympathetic pregnancy, this condition occurs when men experience physical or psychological phenomena like nausea, depression, or even a toothache seemingly in tandem with their pregnant partners. Along those same lines, maternal post-partum depression is also closely linked and a significant predictor of paternal post-partum depression. These are just a few instances where female fertility has been linked to symptoms that can seemingly be shared between two people.

In your case, it may be a bit more reasonable to suspect that your boyfriend's moods could be a result of a reaction to another person, rather than hormonal cycles. There is some
psychological literature that explains a phenomenon referred to as emotional contagion. This is more or less the process of one person’s mood rubbing off on another. In a given interaction (say between you and your boyfriend), emotional contagion starts to take hold when one person begins to mirror the facial expressions, vocal qualities, posture, and movement of the person with whom they’re interacting without even noticing. As those actions occur, the person doing the mimicking seemingly adopts the other’s emotions. While this phenomenon is thought to encourage successful social interactions and empathy, it can also make a person more vulnerable to the influence of another’s negativity or bad mood.

You mention that your boyfriend seems to experience these monthly emotions even before you mention your period. Do you notice your moods changing around the time you have your period? Is it possible that your moods and emotions during that time are different than what you perceive them to be (i.e., that you feel that they are typical or positive, when in fact, they are not)? Is it possible as your boyfriend experiences a change in your mood, he unconsciously mimics it before you two even talk about it? These might be issues the two of you want to discuss.

Whether his moods are a result of emotional contagion or some other factor, there are some ways to address noticeable emotional change patterns. Together, you could try to maximize positive emotions during these times by taking a fun trip to a museum, taking a walk in the park, or going for a run (to get those endorphins going!), or tag-teaming dinner preparations. Research has demonstrated that those who practice regular reflections of gratitude also have significant and positive health benefits (emotional and physical), so you both might take a few minutes per week to reflect on things you are grateful for or excited about. If you want some help or an outside perspective in working with your boyfriend’s monthly emotional episodes, you might also consider checking in with a counselor or your health care provider, either together or on your own.

All in all, a critical part about emotion management is recognizing that the emotions are there in the first place! So far, sounds like you’re on the right track to being a responsive partner.

Alice!

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