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American Melancholy constructions of Depression in the Twentieth Century

Laura D. Hirshbein

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As *American Melancholy* reveals, if you read about depression anywhere today—medical journal, popular magazine, National Institute of Mental Health pamphlet, or pharmaceutical company drug promotional literature--you will find three main pieces of information either explicitly stated or strongly implied: depression is a disease (like any other physical disease); it is extraordinarily prevalent in the world; and it occurs about twice as frequently in women as in men. Yet, depression was not classified as a disease until the 1980 publication of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-III (DSM-III).* How is it that such an illness, thought to affect between 14 and 17 million Americans, was not specifically defined until the late twentieth century?

American Melancholy traces the growth of depression as an object of medical study and as a consumer commodity and illustrates how and why depression came to be such a huge medical, social, and cultural phenomenon. It is the first book to address gender issues in the construction of depression, explores key questions of how its diagnosis was developed, how it has been used, and how we should question its application in American society.

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