



Women & Stress: Juggling, Balancing ... by award-winning author / stress-relief expert **Susie Mantell**

Scenario 1: *Presentation in 10 minutes. Angry client on line 1. School nurse on line 2.*

Scenario 2: *Meeting at 3. Sitting in traffic at 2:52. Little League at 6. Pick up husband at airport at 7:30.*

Scenario 3: *Annual report due December 20. Family arriving for the holidays on December 21.*

Sound familiar?

These days, for many women, combined responsibilities in the workplace and at home necessitate some skilled juggling to balance worlds amid diverse and pressing needs. Increasing responsibilities sandwiched between care for children and for aging parents, create a climate in which stress has become a fact of life. For men and women alike, increased workplace tension, economic challenges, and longer days with extended periods seated at computers, are resulting in everyday irritability, unprecedented incidence of depression, addiction and unhealthy eating habits, stress-related illness, and if unchecked, burnout.

Whether today's women are CEO's or surgeons, teachers, nurses or fighter pilots, whether they are independent women on their own, or at-home moms, or retirees reinventing themselves, many experience cumbersome expectations. Some of these expectations are imposed by others, and some by their own, perfectionist "good girl" selves, honed over a lifetime of familial tutelage, and cultural observation.

(Caution: I am about to make some generalizations. They are not absolutes, nor universal truths, nor intended as sexist, so no disgruntled emails please.)

Men and women are different. They differ genetically and culturally, not in every way, but in some aspects that may influence what stresses us, and how we cope best. Research suggests that women may have access to some previously unrecognized coping mechanisms for all of this stress. We all know women who find comfort in talking out their problems. Because men are programmed (culturally at least and genetically perhaps) to problem-solve, many tend to want to fix. It's that Mars & Venus thing. For women however, feeling heard actually often diminishes their stress. They may explore a problem, before they are ready to fix it. It's a developmental process. Obviously, this is not the case for every woman or every man, but it seems to happen enough to see an interesting trend worth consideration.

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An interesting study out of UCLA examined a possible connection between the release of the hormone Oxytocin in women, and how they cope with stress. In ascertaining the authenticity of the article I'd read about the "Tend and Befriend" study, I dropped a note to the researcher, Dr. Shelley Taylor, who also shared that book entitled, *"The Tending Instinct."*

In short, the "Tend and Befriend" study suggests that in humans as well as other animals, in addition to the widely accepted "Fight or Flight" human stress response, women may also respond to stress by care-giving and affiliating. Perhaps like you, I've witnessed this phenomenon myself. One example was immediately following 9/11. In those first minutes, hours and days following the terrifying events of that day, many women moved into "hearth-tending" mode, ensuring care of the home and family, stocking up on supplies. Many men, once safety of their loved ones was ascertained, focused on the "hunter-gatherer" pursuit in the world of work. Again, some men are the more nurturing partner and some women more aggressive, but again, general trends are worth exploring.

Psychologist Shelley Taylor, PhD, along with five colleagues, developed a model which suggests that women respond to some types of stress by nurturing and forming alliances with a larger social group. Women's pituitary's release of the hormone Oxytocin, which enhances bonding, may influence their stress responses. Taylor suggests the female brain's care-giving system counteracts the metabolic activity of the fight-or-flight response (*increased heart rate, blood pressure, cortisol release, etc.*) and leads to affiliative behavior. Fleeing too quickly in a crisis could put offspring at risk, reducing survival of the species. In Taylor's research, mother rats were intentionally stressed. (*Nobody likes their cage rattled!*) Rather than retreating or striking out, the females' response was to nuzzle their pups. Oxytocin is also released at childbirth and has been credited with that extraordinary initial bond between mother and baby. It has been called "The Falling in Love" hormone, also released during sex.

Harvard Medical School's well-known "Nurses Health Study" is among the largest and longest running investigations of factors that influence women's health. Started in 1976 with 122,000 nurses, and expanded in 1989, the Nurses Study has now tracked over 200,000 women. While it began as a study on The Pill, the scientific contributions in many and varied aspects of health are now abundant, and have provided data used in research regarding heart health, cancer, and diabetes, to name a few.

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In keeping with Dr. Taylor's "Tend and Befriend" premise, studies have indicated that those women who've maintained good friendships were found less likely to develop physical ailments and more likely to be fundamentally happy. Some scientists have said that not having close friends is as detrimental to long-term wellness and healthy longevity as smoking or obesity. I would contend this applies to men as well.

More About Dr. Shelley Taylor's "Tend & Befriend" Research

www.apa.org/monitor/julaug00/stress.aspx

More About Harvard's Nurses Health Study of Women's Health

www.channing.harvard.edu/nhs

What Are Friends For? A Longer Life

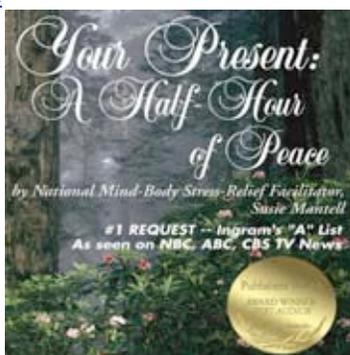
www.nytimes.com/2009/04/21/health/21well.html

Why Loneliness Is Bad for Your Health

health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/brain-and-behavior/articles/2008/11/12/why-loneliness-is-bad-for-your-health.html

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