

Like clockwork

from Dr. Laura Corio, M.D.

Women's Health Issues

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Women & Stress

When life gets too stressful do you tend to have a meltdown, talk it out then hug it out with a friend while the men you know bottle up their anxiety and let it build until they finally snap? Perhaps this is an oversimplification bordering on cliché but men and women do seem to process stress differently. Why is this so? And what can you as a woman do to cope with the curveballs life tosses your way?

It's the Hormones

Three hormones play a role in how everyone reacts to stress: cortisol, epinephrine, and oxytocin. When we're under the gun, a cocktail of cortisol and epinephrine raise blood pressure and circulating blood sugar level, and cortisol alone lowers the effectiveness of the immune system. A woman's brain releases oxytocin to counter the production of cortisol and epinephrine, and to promote relaxation. While men do secrete some amount of oxytocin during stressful times, they do so in much smaller amounts than women, so they experience fewer of its calming effects.

A Different Response

The most famous response to stress is "flight or fight" where you either run away from the thing that's bugging you or try to beat it down. A relatively new theory speculates that women take a different approach; rather than turning tail or facing off, they reach out to those around them with social activities designed to protect themselves and others to ease worry and promote safety. Here again, oxytocin is partially responsible. When combined with other female hormones it produces a mellowing effect and ups the urge for social interaction or the so-called "Tend or Be-Friend Response". Men, on the other hand, with their miniscule shot of oxytocin, usually exhibit the classic flight or fight stress behavior.

Unique Stressors

Although it's another overgeneralization, men and women often do see the world differently and as a result, different things tend to stress them out. Psychologists will tell you that most men feel performance-based demands the most keenly whereas women feel overwhelmed by self-sacrifice in relationships. If putting everyone else's needs in front of your own, often at the risk of burning yourself out, sounds familiar then you suffer from relationship-based stress. But in this day and age where women are expected to be breadwinners, parents, partners, multitaskers and everything in between, there's a good chance you may often experience both kinds of stress.

Sharing the Burden

If there is one positive thing about women and stress, it's that many of us seek out support. We try to discuss what's happening and figure out how to resolve our issues. Whether it's with friends, family or professional support, we like to tell our stories and get everything out on the table. In fact, I can't tell you how many discussions I've had on my exam tables about what's going on in my patient's lives. I may be an ob/gyn by trade, but that is part of what I'm here for! I believe it's a very positive thing to share your emotional experiences with the people you trust.

Learn from Men

However, by taking their stress on to the golf course or basketball course, men may be on to something too. Taking an hour or so to sweat out your troubles and clear your head can be very helpful. Far from being a waste of time, studies show that exercise can improve problem solving skills and lead your brain to those ah-ha moments that just don't seem to come any other way. Plus when your life is busy and stressful taking time out for yourself is especially important.



Women and Stress

Women's brains release oxytocin to promote relaxation during stressful times.



Dr. Corio's Resources

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PEARLS

The Question: Is it true that Yoga helps reduce stress?

Dr. Corio Says: Yes indeed. There is so much evidence that yoga is a super stress buster it's hard to know where to begin. Let's start with one of the more recent studies like one done earlier this year at Ohio State University which showed that a regular yoga practice lowers a number of chemicals in the blood and reduce the level of inflammation that normally rises because of both normal aging and stress. These chemicals, including a class of compounds known as cytokines, as well as inflammation have been implicated in diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and a host of other debilitating stress-related ailments. The best news is it doesn't take as much dedication as you'd think: women in this study only did two classes or videos a week. Besides the physical bonuses, they reported feeling less anxiety and worry too. And this is just one of thousands of studies demonstrating the positive effects of yoga on stress and mental health.

The Question: What foods are good for fighting stress?

Dr. Corio Says: You probably already know that drinking too much caffeine can send your stress levels off the charts. But you may not know that a handful of blueberries or a few orange slices bring you closer to inner peace. Both of these foods deliver a high dose of vitamin C, help regulate blood sugar and keep free radicals in check – all important ways your body deals with stress. Turkey contains L-Tryptophan which is an amino acid that triggers the release of serotonin, a feel-good brain chemical. This is the reason why many people who eat turkey feel relaxed, or even tired, after eating it. Chicken also contains a high amount of L-Tryptophan so can also produce the same calming effect. Just avoid eating either fried or you'll miss out on the major benefits of these foods! Soy, brown rice, apricots and green veggies are also considered edible Zen. Oh, and some really delicious news: Moderate amounts of dark chocolate have been shown to lower level of stress hormones, improve insulin sensitivity and improvement. The operant word here is moderate.

Sources: WebMD, Uptodate.com, sciencedaily.com

Doctor & Office Hours

Doctor's Hours

Monday	12:00 PM-6:00 PM
Tuesday	9:00 AM-3:00 PM
Wednesday	9:30 AM-2:30 PM
Thursday	8:00 AM-2:00 PM

Office Hours

Monday	10:00 AM-5:00 PM
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News Flash

For most of us, sleep deprivation is a myth. We're not zombies. The non-profit National Sleep Foundation says the average American gets 7 hours a night (and that's not enough) but a University of Maryland study earlier this year shows we typically get 8 hours and are doing fine. In fact, Americans get just as much sleep nowadays as they did 40 years ago, the study found. The bottom line is that a good night's sleep is within reach for most of us if we follow the guidelines for rest hygiene: Go to bed at the same time nightly. Refrain from caffeine, heavy or spicy foods, and alcohol and other optional medications that might keep you awake, four to six hours before bed-time. Have a pre-sleep routine so you wind down before you hop in. Block out distracting lights and noises. Only engage in sleep and sex in bed. Exercise regularly but not right before bed. Consider taking a mid-day nap to supplement your nightly ZZZs.