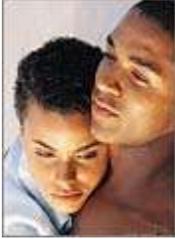


Why Men and Women Handle Stress Differently



WebMD has the answers in part 1 of a 2-part series on stress and the sexes.

WebMD Feature

Reviewed By Brunilda Nazario, MD

Part 1: Why Men and Women Handle Stress Differently

Amanda Ezman's life is a little on the stressful side these days. She's a first-grade teacher to a classroom full of rambunctious 6-year-olds, she's planning a July wedding, and she's house hunting with her future husband. So it's a common occurrence for her to come home after a harried day and feel stressed. What does she do?

"When it all piles up, I usually need to cry and get it all out," says Ezman, of Sherrill, N.Y. "I talk and then talk some more and then some more, and then once I've had a chance to talk through all the things that bottle up inside me during the day, I usually feel better."

Andrew Flynn's pregnant wife and 5-year-old daughter have relocated from Long Island, N.Y., to upstate N.Y., while he still works on Long Island. He commutes once a week back and forth, and in the meantime, tries to get his family settled in their new house near Syracuse. Stress is unfortunately a part of his life for the time being.

"I don't talk about my feelings when I'm stressed," says Flynn. "It's easier just to let it pass and move on."

Clearly, men and women tend to deal with stress in very different ways -- but why? WebMD talks to experts who explain why stress affects the sexes so differently.

Men vs. Women and Hormones

One of the most important reasons why men and women react differently to stress is hormones. Three play a crucial role: cortisol, epinephrine, and oxytocin.

When stress strikes, hormones called cortisol and epinephrine together raise a person's blood pressure and circulating blood sugar level, and cortisol alone lowers the effectiveness of the immune system.

"People used to think there was a difference in the amounts of cortisol released during a stressful situation in women," says Robert Sapolsky, PhD, professor of neurobiology at

Stanford University. "The thinking was women released more of this hormone, and that produced all sorts of nutty theories about why women are so emotional."

But the fact of the matter, explains Sapolsky, is that there is no consistent difference in cortisol production at all between men and women. It really all comes down to the hormone called oxytocin.

In women, when cortisol and epinephrine rush through the bloodstream in a stressful situation, oxytocin comes into play. It is released from the brain, countering the production of cortisol and epinephrine, and promoting nurturing and relaxing emotions.

While men also secrete the hormone oxytocin when they're stressed, it's in much smaller amounts, leaving them on the short end of the stick when it comes to stress and hormones.

Tend and Befriend, Fight or Flight

While most people are familiar with the fight or flight theory (when confronted with stress, do you stay and fight or turn tail and run?), there's a new theory in town tailored just for women.

An influential study published in the July 2000 issue of *Psychological Review* reported that females were more likely to deal with stress by "tending and befriending" -- that is, nurturing those around them and reaching out to others. "Tending involves nurturant activities designed to protect the self and offspring that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process," write researchers, including Shelly E. Taylor, PhD, a distinguished professor in the department of psychology at UCLA.

Why do women tend and befriend instead of fight or flight? The reason, in large part, is oxytocin combined with female reproductive hormones, explained researchers in the study.

Men, on the other hand, with smaller amounts of oxytocin, lean toward the tried and true fight or flight response when it comes to stress -- either bottling it up and escaping, or fighting back.

Demand vs. Energy

"The major sex differences I see have to do with the management of demand and maintenance of energy," says Carl Pickhardt, PhD, a psychologist and author of *The Everything Parent's Guide to Positive Discipline*. "Because male self-esteem is often built around adequacy of performance, and female self-esteem is often built around adequacy of relationships, overdemand and insufficient self-maintenance tend to cut somewhat different ways for women and for men."

A woman, explains Pickhardt, is often at risk of letting other people's needs determine her limits, while her own needs are ignored.

"Self-sacrifice in relationships is how many women enter stress," says Pickhardt, who is a spokesman for the American Psychological Association.

Men, on the other hand, are often at risk of letting challenge and competition set the pace.

"Men tend to let their rival's efforts or their employer's agenda set the level of their demand, losing focus on the self to preoccupation with winning or attaining an extrinsic objective," Pickhardt tells WebMD. "Achieving a winning performance at all costs is how many men enter stress."

What is the greatest stressor for women and for men? Not surprisingly, "Relationship loss for women, performance failure for men, are often the greatest stressors each sex experiences," says Pickhardt.

Managing Stress

When it comes to managing stress, men and women just handle it differently. Take Amanda Ezmen and Andrew Flynn, for example. Both lead stressful lives, but both handle it in their own way.

"Managing stress is very different by sex," Pickhardt tells WebMD. "Women often seek support to talk out the emotional experience, to process what is happening and what might be done."

Whether its friends, family, or a support group, women like to tell their stories.

"Men often seek an escape activity to get relief from stress, to create a relaxing diversion, to get away," says Pickhardt.

Golfing is a common example of how men escape -- they're acting out their stressful energy in a challenging way while enjoying the companionship of other men. They typically, explains Pickhardt, don't take time out of a round of golf to discuss their feelings or stress amongst each other.

Stress and Evolution

For both sexes, stress has evolved from the days on the savannah when we were running for our lives. Now, it's mortgage payments and childcare that keep us up night after night.

"The single most important point to make is that stress has evolved from dealing with a single short-term crisis to the ability to turn stress on in a chronic way," says Sapolsky, author of *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*.

Unfortunately, because the hormonal result of stress is increased blood pressure and circulating blood sugar levels, and a less-effective immune system, chronic stress can lead to serious health problems.

"Men and women need to find ways to deal with chronic stress. This is not what the body has evolved for, and it can increase a person's risk of everything from heart disease to metabolic disorders to impaired wound healing," Sapolsky tells WebMD.

Dealing With Stress

In part 2 of this series, experts give WebMD tips on how men and women can better handle all the curveballs life throws at them. Here's a preview of what's to come:

"Managing stress from overdemand and inadequate self-maintenance is very simple, and so very complex," says Pickhardt. "Two little words are all it takes: 'No' and 'Yes.'"

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SOURCES: Carl Pickhardt, PhD, psychologist; author, *The Everything Parent's Guide to Positive Discipline*, Austin, Texas. Shelly E. Taylor, PhD, distinguished professor, department of psychology, UCLA. Robert Sapolsky, PhD, professor of neurobiology, Stanford University; author, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Stanford, Calif. Taylor, S.E. *Psychological Review*, 2000; vol 107: pp 411-429.

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