

Natural Awakenings article, June 2010 *Men's stress is different*: 550-600 wds

Dr. Georgia Wilkins refers to “the battle of the stresses” in her book *The Male Stress Survival Guide* (Newmarket Press, 2002) by noting that men and women do manifest (pun intended) and deal with stress differently. She writes that men are more likely than women to avoid doctors, and to pass off stress as nothing more than fatigue or flu. Men are more likely to have heart attacks at a younger age than women, or suffer from high blood pressure. Men are more likely than women to be what Dr. Wilkins calls “compulsive competitors,” who compete both with others *and* with themselves.

Men are just as likely as women to end up with tension headaches and muscle strain, but they may not specifically attribute these physical systems to stress. Stress can also create difficulties in making decisions, and result in major disorganization that simply increases the stress level.

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. It used to be thought that, “Women released more cortisol, and that produced all sorts of nutty theories about why women are so emotional,” says Robert Sapolsky, PhD, professor of neurobiology at Stanford University. What is actually different that men produce much less of oxytocin when stressed, and have less hormone protection to handle stress.

What is a man to do?

First, recognize there is both good stress and bad stress. Good stress is produced when a situation is challenging, and requires strategy and action to address. Stress produces adrenaline, which is good in life threatening situations, and in highly competitive situations like running a track meet. The heart sends more blood to the brain and muscles, aiding quick decisions. Bad stress is of the more chronic variety, such as living with constant anxiety, ultimately impacting the immune system functions.

Second, recognize that anyone can change at any time in life. Heart attack patients talk about this shift in perspective, learning from a near death experience how to move away from being a Type A personality to take life more slowly. There's no need to wait for a heart attack to change a lifestyle. Look at the things that can be changed now. There is plenty of material available on the web, in magazines such as this one, and in bookstores that reiterate the basic advice: eat right, get enough sleep, exercise, meditate or find another way to simply “breathe first” before tackling the next action.

Third, become a master of triage: decide what truly needs to be done, and when to do it, then concentrate on finishing that before moving on to the next action. Whether in business or in school, decide what things can be let go, or delayed. Look at the day, determine the biggest, most unpleasant task that must get accomplished, and “eat the frog first.” To start, or stay on track, get an accountability partner to help.

Finally, try acting more like a woman. Spend time with your children: research has shown that increases the levels of oxytocin in men's systems. Learn to recognize emotions and talk about them, which can aid men in reducing stress. Women know it isn't always necessary to find a solution. Sometimes talking about what is happening acts as a safety valve. Alternatively, talking about a problem or emotion can allow a solution to present itself to the speaker.

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