

HEALTH AND STRESS

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THE DEMISE OF THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

KEY WORDS: job stress in women, cancer, ulcers, alcoholism, crime, heart attacks, Type A behavior, working mothers, gender differences, femininity

It's difficult to get through the day without some mention of stress in newspapers, magazines, and TV, or from friends, family, and fellow workers. Several years ago, *Time Magazine's* cover story called stress "The Epidemic of the Eighties", as if it were some sort of new plague. And the problem has steadily worsened since then. Why all the sudden fuss? After all, stress has been around since Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden.

Is it because there is more stress today? Is contemporary stress somehow different and more dangerous? Or does our current preoccupation stem from increasing scientific evidence confirming its important role in cardiovascular disease, cancer, colitis, ulcers, skin disorders, and infections ranging from the common cold and herpes, to tuberculosis and AIDS? It is quite likely that all of these are important contributing factors.

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Numerous surveys reveal that Americans perceive they are under much more stress now than five, ten, and certainly, twenty years ago. And contemporary stresses are also quite different from those experienced by our ancestors. Primitive man was subjected to the dangers of sudden death from predators and warring tribes, or finding shelter to escape powerful environmental forces like hurricanes and floods. There was often the steady stress of struggling to forage for food in order to stay alive. These were primarily physical challenges. As a consequence, over the lengthy course of human evolution, automatic and immediate life saving responses have been exquisitely honed to provide more strength and skill in combat, or greater speed in getting away from a scene of potential peril.

However, contemporary stressors are quite different. Fear of personal physical harm, or finding food and safe lodging, are no longer major concerns. Our problems are more apt to be of an emotional and mental, rather than physical nature, particularly for females. The tragedy is that our bodies still react in the same old way. Unfortunately, these responses are now not only purposeless, but potentially perilous. And there is little we can do to prevent them, when we perceive that we are suffering from severe stress.

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*The Newsletter of
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Such instantaneous "fight or flight" reactions would have come in handy for a caveman occasionally confronted by a saber toothed tiger. But they don't do much good when you're stuck in a traffic jam on the way to a crucial appointment, during telephone arguments with irate customers, or in dealing with a heap of harassments and hassles that can occur several times a day. Repeatedly invoked, it's not hard to see how the frequent rises in blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension, and shunting of blood away from the gut, could cause heart attacks, strokes, headache, muscle spasm, low back pain, ulcers, and other "Diseases of Civilization".

Contemporary stress also stems from more insidious and persistent problems, like loneliness, poverty and frustration. These take a steady toll by disrupting immune system function, and lowering resistance to infections, cancer, and other diseases. Jobs are far and away the leading source of stress for American adults, because of insecurity resulting from increased downsizing, a growing need to compete in a global marketplace, information overload due to new technologies, emphasis on quantity rather than quality of work, prejudice due to age, race, sex, and a combination of circumstances that leave workers with the feeling that they have less and less control over their daily lives.

Is Contemporary Female Stress Different And More Dangerous?

Female workers may be particularly affected, despite the promises of the Equal Rights Amendment and the lobbying efforts of various support and suffrage organizations. Women are consistently paid less and are not as likely to be promoted compared to their male counterparts, even when they have superior skills, experience and training. This becomes increasingly apparent as they start to climb the corporate ladder. Those who do reach the upper rungs bump their heads on a glass ceiling, when it comes to being asked to the Board of Directors, or offers for senior partnership status in legal and other professional organizations.

Many have additional stresses, since in addition to gender and racial prejudices, they are often subjected to overt and covert sexual harassment. Recently, there has been a crackdown on this because of widespread publicity about such practices in the Armed Services and large organizations. The "Tailhook" scandal and other instances of sexual misconduct by superiors in the military and corporations, have resulted in severe personal penalties and large monetary awards and fines. Although there has been increased scrutiny of hiring and promotion policies to prevent this, the vast majority of such abuses are not reported for fear of future recrimination, and the problem is still rampant.

Women who belong to minority groups may suffer even more. Affirmative action and other legislation designed to protect against discrimination can also backfire, by appearing to provide them with an unfair advantage. Even when a woman of color is hired because of superior qualifications, or properly advanced to a higher position as a reward for superb past performance, the assumption is often made that this was done to avoid costly litigation and fines for failure to conform with Federal regulations. As a result, there has been a severe backlash in some sectors. Some caucasions claim that they are now the ones that are being discriminated against. In many instances, hiring or promotion practices are dictated more by Federal and State mandates, than the individual's qualifications. California has recently rescinded some of these.

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Cancer, Ulcers, Alcoholism, Crime

The very nature of being a female has changed dramatically over the past seven or eight decades, with disastrous health consequences. Cancer of the lung was almost unheard of in women at the turn of the century. However, as they increasingly began to emulate men, female smoking started to become socially acceptable. Subsequently, the movies and magazine advertisements showed sophisticated and attractive females, with their elegant cigarette holders, presumably to reduce distasteful nicotine breath. This elevated cigarette smoking to a stylish status symbol that was not only acceptable behavior in public, but something that was desirable.

We are now starting to pay the price for this. Between 1960 and 1990, lung cancer deaths in women increased 400%. It is not generally appreciated that for the past 10 years, this has exceeded mortality from cancer of the breast. The American Cancer Society estimated that 64,300 women died from lung cancer in 1994, compared to 44,300 from breast malignancies. Women who smoke increase their chances of dying from lung cancer nearly 12 times, from bronchitis and emphysema 10 times, and have triple the death rates due to heart disease. Many people smoke because they are under stress, and since working women tend to inhale more, their risk for smoking related deaths is likely to be even greater. Currently more teenage girls smoke than boys, possibly because they believe this will help them from gaining weight. There has also been a recent sharp rise in female cigar smokers. Cigars have much more nicotine than cigarettes, but are generally not inhaled, so that lung cancer rates are not markedly increased. However, most female cigar aficionados are cigarette smokers, and tend to inhale, which could put them at greater risk.

In an effort to accommodate their work demands, most working women tend to marry and have children later in life. Many never become pregnant at all, and it seems quite likely that this may put them at greater risk for both breast malignancies and cancer of the ovary. It has been well established that the earlier a woman has her first child, or even becomes pregnant, the less likely she will be to develop cancer of the breast.

This protective effect of pregnancy is thought to be related to a reduction in prolactin, a pituitary hormone that stimulates breast tissue growth, and promotes breast cancer in experimental animals. This may partially explain the current increase in breast malignancies, since the percentage of women having their first child over the age of 35 has quintupled since 1970. Single career women also have fourteen times more deadly ovarian cancer, compared to a matched group of homemakers. A recent large scale study of female lawyers similarly showed a significant association between higher levels of job stress, and an increased incidence of miscarriage and spontaneous abortion, which would also diminish the protective effect of pregnancy.

We tend to think of ulcers as usually occurring in men, especially those who are constantly tense, worried, anxious, or angry. However, that was not the case in the last century, when women were repressed and subjected to rigorous, demanding, and often unappreciated domestic duties. In the Victorian era, it is quite clear that ulcers were primarily a female affliction. Indeed, seven out of every eight ulcers occurred in women. As mechanical and electrical appliances began to make life easier, this ratio changed dramatically, and by the middle of this century, nine out of ten ulcer patients were male. The pendulum is now swinging back in the other direction, as women are increasingly subjected to highly competitive and frustrating professional and social demands.

At the turn of the century, serious alcoholism was rarely seen in women. It is estimated that more than one out of every three problem drinkers is now female, compared to one out of six only two decades ago. In addition, working wives were significantly more likely to be chronic alcoholics than housewives or single employees. Many female executives reported that in order to compete with male counterparts, it was necessary to "go out and drink with the boys" to attract clients, a practice often encouraged by an expense account to subsidize this activity. Substance abuse and incarceration in prison were relatively rare in females decades ago. There are now 75,000 women confined to State and Federal facilities for criminal activities, or six percent of the total prison population.

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Heart Attacks And Type A Traits

Coronary heart disease was relatively rare in females during the first half of the present century, but this has changed dramatically in recent years. Even more impressive is the pronounced shift that has taken place in the ratio of heart attacks between men and women. This is somewhat surprising, since estrogen replacement therapy is now available, and should afford increased protection for postmenopausal females. The most likely explanation for this appears to be job stress. This is particularly true for work activities that involve repeated deadlines that are difficult to meet, and constant competition, that tends to breed hostility.

Scientific studies on the health effects of job stress also confirm an increased incidence of coronary heart disease, when work duties involve considerable responsibility, but little control or decision making authority. This damaging combination is characteristic of traditionally female occupations, such as being a waitress, telephone operator, assembly or garment worker, cashier, sales clerk, and especially customer service and complaint personnel. New sources of job stress should also be anticipated as women enter occupations and activities previously dominated by men, including athletic competition, mining, police and fire duties, racing thoroughbreds, or rocketing into space.

The term Type A behavior, was coined four decades ago by two cardiologists. They were intrigued by the fact that two-thirds of the heart attacks in the United States occurred in men, while in Mexico, the incidence was the same in males and females. A similar equal split appeared to exist in southern Italy, but not in the north, where the ratio was four men to one woman. Such disparities were obviously not due to any difference in diet or other common environmental influences, and on further analysis, they appeared to be related more to certain socio-cultural and behavioral traits. These could best be described as manifestations of masculinity, such as aggressiveness, a fierce, competitive attitude, always being in a hurry, and persistently pursuing power, or approval and recognition from others. In short, Type A was considered to be a male behavior.

Such individuals usually show evidence of increased muscular activity in the form of gestures, and facial activities such as grimaces, gritting and grinding of the teeth. Tensing the muscles of the jaw is common, especially in very aggressive and hostile individuals. Pounding with a fist, as well as frequent fist clenching, are often employed for emphasis or to help drive an important point home. Fidgeting, tapping the feet or fingers, leg shaking, or playing with a pencil in some rhythmic fashion, are also very commonly seen.

Since Type As tend to be very competitive and always in a hurry, they eat, talk, and do most other activities quickly. They are frequently preoccupied with what to do next, and generally try to do several things simultaneously. Thus, they like to read or watch TV while eating, or have something to read when going to the bathroom, or viewing TV at other times. They have few interests outside their work, feel guilty while on vacation, and are usually in close touch with the office. There is often an attitude of bravado about their own superiority, and they are easily angered or frustrated if their wishes are not respected, or their goals can't be achieved.

Type As are poor listeners, and tend to interrupt a conversation by finishing the speaker's sentence, or interjecting their own thoughts. This is usually done in dramatic fashion, by varying the volume or pitch of their voice, or by alternating rapid bursts of words with long pauses of hesitation indicating intensive thought, to insure that the audience is listening to every word. They may also have unusual breathing patterns, with frequent sighing, produced by inhaling more air than needed while speaking, and then releasing it during the middle or end of a sentence to provide emphasis. They also try to achieve a similar effect by body movements, facial expressions, gesticulations, or fist clenching.

Conversely, they can't stand to be interrupted, since they want to be the center of attraction. This can cause problems when two or more flaming Type As get involved in certain conversations where there may be a significant difference of opinion. As a result, Type As find it difficult to develop close personal relationships, or the strong social support that have been found to be so successful in buffering the harmful effects of stress.

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As more and more women enter a male dominated work force, they are increasingly developing these male Type A traits. This may partially explain their significantly increased incidence of heart attacks in recent years. A panel of experts assembled by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, concluded that "Type A behavior is a risk factor for coronary heart disease of the same order of magnitude as hypertension, high cholesterol, and cigarette smoking."

We all have some Type A characteristics, so how can you find out if you are at risk? The following dozen statements describe some common Type A characteristics:

1. I tend to work best when I am under the pressure of a tight deadline.
2. I usually talk louder and faster than others and emphasize my point by facial expressions or gestures with my hands.
3. Winning is very important to me, even if I am playing a game with a child.
4. I rarely take time out to admire a sunset, or things of natural beauty, or even a painting.
5. I become upset if I find someone performing a task slower than I can do it, and feel that if I really want something done, I must do it myself.
6. Just lying on a beach for a week and doing nothing would never be pleasurable for me.
7. Standing in line, or being behind a slow driver makes me impatient or angry, even when I have plenty of time.
8. I am more concerned with what other people think of me than with my own opinion of myself.
9. I always feel rushed and, whenever possible, try to do more than one thing at the same time.
10. I tend to interrupt people when they are talking to me, or even when they are speaking to others.
11. I like to be on time, but definitely dislike arriving early, and having to wait around with nothing to do.
12. It is better to do many things fairly well than a few things excellently.

If more than six of the above seem to apply, it's a good possibility that you have Type A tendencies. If nine or more are right on the money, then you might want to consider further testing.

The reason for this is that accurately identifying and measuring Type A tendencies is a complicated procedure. It is best performed by a trained investigator, who conducts a provoking personal interview designed to elicit typical Type A behaviors, such as frequent interruptions, speech characteristics, facial expressions, increased muscular activity, a hostile attitude, etc. The interaction is videotaped, so that it can be carefully reviewed by experts to rate the frequency and severity of the above. It is also useful for the individual to observe, should it be subsequently decided that some effort should be made to reduce or modify potentially harmful behavioral tendencies.

Using a questionnaire or short self-report quiz such as this one, is not as satisfactory, since Type As are frequently unaware of many of their traits, or will deny them. However, questionnaires are much more cost effective, since they don't require expensive personnel and equipment, provide immediate results, and can serve as rough indicators.

It is also important to recognize that not everyone who exhibits Type A behavior is at increased risk for coronary heart disease. Over the past few decades as this concept has evolved, there has been a progressive effort to distinguish between general Type A behavior, and coronary prone Type A behavior. While this is still a subject of considerable controversy, some suggest that it is those individuals who are extremely hostile, cynical, aggressive, and constantly competitive, that are at particular risk.

Type As who are not hostile, are cooperative rather than competitive, and most importantly, are always in complete control of their activities, may be very healthy. Such individuals thrive on the hectic pace of life in the fast lane, doing several things at once, always being in a hurry, and having lots of responsibilities, because they are productive, rather than self-destructive. They may appear to behave the same way, but are quite different from those who take their orders from others. Like Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a large boulder to the top of the hill, only to have it fall down again, these Type As are constantly frustrated, because they have little control over their jobs and their work is never finished.

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Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man, And Work Like A Dog

Men are expected to struggle and strive for the external trappings of success, such as money, social status, and job promotion. But women are presumably supposed to be gratified simply by the self-satisfaction of a job well done. A fierce competitive, and aggressive attitude is acceptable, and even admired in males. Women, who must often behave in a similar fashion to retain or improve their positions, are more likely to be referred to as "bitch", "ball buster", "dyke", or some other derisive and sarcastic term. There is always the tacit implication that they must have superior qualities, and failure to perform well will likely be attributed to their membership in the "weaker" sex.

While working women are obviously subjected to far greater and different stresses than their grandmothers, so are housewives. A century ago, the role model for girls was much more apt to be a loving and compassionate mother, whose prime purpose in life was to provide for the needs of her family. She took pride in her skills as a cook and laundress, in keeping her home spotless, and rearing her children to have proper manners, values and goals. Today, simply being a "housewife", is often a demeaning or derogatory designation. The emphasis now is on an "upward mobility" that implies liberation from household chores by finding a career or profession.

However, housewife duties have also changed markedly and have become more stressful. Modern moms are expected to be up-to-date on the latest advances in child psychology and nutritional advances, involved in PTA, den mother, chauffeuring activities, arranging dinner parties, and organizing and adhering to a budget for household expenses, while at the same time, learning to excel at golf, tennis, bridge, boating, skiing, or developing skills as a hostess, that may be required to keep up with a husband or other females. Many have increased responsibilities as they have to assume the father's role in the rapidly rising number of single parent households. Others also find that they have to "Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man, And Work Like A Dog" in order to survive.

Researchers recently reported that working women with children have higher levels of stress hormones than their childless counterparts. They administered questionnaires to determine stress levels and tested urine samples taken over a two-day period in more than 100 black and white women working in clerical or customer service positions. Around 66% had at least one child at home, and slightly more than one in three were single, divorced, separated, or widowed. All of the participants had an elevation in catecholamines like adrenaline, during the day and into the evening.

Working mothers had cortisol levels that increased in the morning, peaked during business hours, and remained elevated until bedtime. A similar pattern was seen in those without children, but their cortisol levels were consistently lower at all times. These differences in cortisol levels persisted regardless of the mother's marital status, income, degree of social support, or number of children. Increased cortisol has been linked with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, and is also associated with depression, and reduced immune system resistance to infections.

As the lead author noted, "This increased strain in working mothers is consistent with other studies showing that mothers employed full-time outside of the home tend to retain the majority of the child-rearing and household responsibility, causing what has been referred to as a 'second shift' for working mothers." The stress levels of stay-at-home mothers during the day were not available for comparison. However, this study shows that just having one child to care for subjects working mothers to significantly increased stress. Some reports have shown that they put in an extra 20 hours a week on household chores such as cleaning, child care, shopping, or running errands, and whenever possible, should get more support from their husbands.

Prior research in male workers reveal a similar rise in stress hormones during work hours, but a more rapid drop in the evening. This may be due to the relief from job stress for men, as opposed to women who return home after work only to face additional stresses. As the old saying goes:

"Father works from sun to sun,
But Mother's work is never done."

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Further confirmation of this comes from a study of male and female teachers. Those who were mothers reported more stress, and also had higher levels of stress hormones between nine and twelve P.M. on weekends, compared to this same period of time on week days while working. They were more apt to be angry or depressed than fathers, or childless teachers, and also did significantly more housework. Paradoxically, despite their extra burden, and evidence of greater emotional and physiologic stress, they actually scored better on tests that measured psychological well-being than all other groups. One probable explanation for this is that they have more and stronger social support.

Companies have increasingly implemented policies and programs to address the particular problems faced by female employees. Some offer flex time, the opportunity to perform more work at home, on-site child care centers, assistance with shopping duties, more reasonable maternity leave, as well as financial support during this period, and a guaranteed right to return to work. It is also important for working women to receive acknowledgment and support at home. Many husbands encourage their wives' careers from an intellectual point of view, are proud of their accomplishments, and grateful for the extra income. However, their female role model is still apt to be a homemaker, and this is how they view their wives from an emotional and psychological perspective. As a result, some expect their working wives to perform all household and child rearing chores, and resent being asked to assist in such chores.

Married couples who work for the same organization may have additional problems for a variety of reasons. This is particularly true if the wife has a higher position, as noted below.



"It was a purely professional decision, Harris. I hope my firing you won't affect our marriage in any way."

Why Can't A Woman Be More Like A Man?

There is no evidence that males are smarter than females, but there are differences in certain abilities, and how they think and feel. When carrying out language tasks, men tend to use the left side of their brain, while women activated both sides. There are significant structural differences. MRI scans show that women have almost twenty five percent more gray matter in regions of the brain considered to be language related. The corpus callosum, a bridge of millions of mere fibers connecting the two sides of the brain, is much larger in women.

If lost in an unfamiliar city, men might be more likely to examine a map, while women would tend to depend on directions and landmarks. While both approaches may be equally successful, they utilize different strategies.

Ever since Rosie The Riveter became a fixture in World War II, and females entered the Armed Services, women have increasingly become involved in traditionally male occupations and professions. This includes not only office and blue collar workers, such as bus drivers and manual laborers, but also professional sports like horse racing, baseball and basketball. Nevertheless, there are numerous significant biological differences between men and women other than the obvious hormonal distinctions. As noted above, and in the following Book Review, many of these have significant behavioral consequences that have not yet been fully appreciated.

In any event, a female body builder flexing her muscles, a husky wrestler sloshing around in the mud, or someone chomping a cigar while maneuvering a monstrous tractor-trailer, does not conjure up the picture of an ideal mate for most men. Will being feminine, dainty, cooperative, rather than competitive, eventually become extinct? "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" complained Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. The problem is that many are doing just that, with disastrous physical and emotional consequences in some instances.

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BOOK REVIEW

Sex On The Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men And Women, Blum, D., Viking Press, New York, NY, 1997, 352 pgs., \$24.95

As its title suggests, this extremely informative book attempts to explore what hard science can tell us about the differences between men and women. Most of us have preconceived but very different notions about this increasingly controversial subject, where there are clearly more questions than answers. One common conception is that women argue with their hearts, not their minds, and since they are less likely to use reason, seldom believe that they are wrong. Or, as Ogden Nash put it in *Frailty, Thy Name Is A Misnomer*, "Women would rather be right than reasonable." The author skillfully dissects out what can be demonstrated from research in evolution, comparative anthropology, animal behavior, endocrinology, neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, and psychology, and how findings from these disciplines can be integrated.

For example, women are better at interpreting facial expressions, communicating with words and body language, and are more apt to be cooperative. Men are likely to be superior at map reading, solving complicated math problems, and are more competitive. Anthropologists suggest that this is because early in our evolution, females stayed home to teach their children how to survive, and they tended to network with other females. Men, and even male apes, tended to jockey for position to see who was dominant, and in primitive societies, were primarily engaged in searching for females, and fighting to possess them.

Testosterone tends to make people aggressive and can lower some immune system components. Estrogen helps prevent heart attacks, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease, and may stimulate immune system function cognitive skills, and sexual desire, especially in post menopausal females. Both sexes have receptors for testosterone in the brain, but what they are doing there is not known. Males have receptors for estrogen, but why is also a mystery. It should also be noted that progesterone is emerging as a powerful neurosteroid. It can restore the myelin sheath around nerves, and raise DHEA levels in men, in addition to its customary hormonal activities during the menstrual cycle and pregnancy. What is the significance of this?

Is behavior determined by heredity or environment? Some research suggests that it may be a combination of both. For example, usually only male songbirds sing, and the area in their brains responsible for this is six times larger than the corresponding site in females. If testosterone is blocked in male baby songbirds, they never sing. However they also won't sing, if at a precise time in their childhood they don't hear their relatives singing. Scientists interpret this as signifying that when a baby male canary hears a song, it triggers some series of reactions that enable testosterone to build his brain in a certain way that will allow him to sing when he is older. Thus, both nature and nurture are required to develop this capability.

In *L'Homme et L'amour*, Paul G  raldy wrote, "We must resemble each other a little to understand each other, but we must be a little different to love each other." Men and women are different, and I suspect most men would agree, "Vive la difference!"

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