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EXPLODING THE MYTHS ABOUT WOMEN, STRESS AND HEART DISEASE

Women have never been as stressed as they are today, and stress can cause major health problems, particularly heart disease. Right? The people who write books on popular psychology and appear on talk shows expend considerable effort to convince women this is so. But the truth is that stress is not unique to 1990's American women, nor does stress, on its own, directly harm a woman's health.

This is not to say that women do not experience stress or that it does not affect their physical well-being. Stress is a fact of life for women today. It is the body's response to the perception of a threat; it's not "all in your head". The body responds to a heightened state of mental alertness with physical changes. These may include increased heart rate, more rapid breathing, a change in blood flow, blood-vessel dilation in some areas and constriction in others, or an increased immune response in the form of more white blood cells circulating in the blood. What you may experience as a result of the body's stress response is pain in your stomach, an attack of hives or other unpleasant symptoms. Women and men are equally susceptible to these physical manifestations of stress.

Sources of stress for women are often different from men, and they often are different at various stages of a woman's life. For younger women, conflict between work and family may be the major stressor. For older women, it may be worry about their grown children, grandchildren, health problems or finances. But contrary to what the popular media conditions us to believe, the burdens women carry today and the accompanying stress are not historically unique. History tells us that these problems are as old as civilization itself. Through the ages, women have gathered food for their



families, gone to work and raised children, often as single parents before the term was even invented. They have contended with war, sweatshops, famine, disease and poverty.

What is peculiar to modern American society is that women's traditional support structures have collapsed. In our transient, "busy-busy" society, women no longer have a safety net, a network of family, neighbours, community and church to support and nurture them. The difference may be not in the degree of stress women experience today but in their resources for coping with it.

The stress-induced symptoms described above, such as a heart racing or stomach pains, are short-term events without lasting effects. Where is that link, hyped so vigorously by the media, between stress and chronic disease or health conditions? The answer is nowhere.

The scientific literature yields little evidence of stress as a major cause in any chronic disease, including heart disease. Experts cannot agree that stress is even a minor risk factor in heart attack in women, yet 25 percent of women who have a heart attack believe that stress was a major cause.

A study published last summer in the respected medical journal *Circulation* offers strong evidence against the stress-heart attack myth. Of the 1500 people in the study, 43 percent of women and 23 percent of men reported experiencing job stress. Over the four years of the study, people with little job stress were just as likely to have a heart attack or die of heart disease as those with high job stress. Job stress was not related to the development of heart disease among men or women, the researchers concluded.

They write, "Popular culture accepts that the stresses of modern life in general and the modern workplace in particular have contributed to the rise of coronary heart disease over the twentieth century." A full 90 percent of people in the study said they believed coronary heart disease was a disease of modern industrial society, but the



statistics do not bear this out. The death rate from coronary heart disease has been dropping over the past 10 years, while the level of stress has stayed the same or increased.

REACTIONS TO STRESS ARE WHAT'S HARMFUL

Stress is hazardous to a woman's health but not in the way popular media would have us believe. The health risk inherent in stress is that it can lead to negative behaviours that in turn cause heart disease and other chronic problems. Lacking the support structures their ancestors had and without the time to developing new ones, women may try all the wrong coping mechanisms as substitutes.

As a result, women under stress are likely to overeat, smoke or drink. A stressed woman, who really needs the exercise, is often the least likely to get it.

HOW TO COPE MORE SUCCESSFULLY

Stress may not cause major chronic diseases, but it can still make life unpleasant and uncomfortable. Many women may not be able to develop the kinds of support structures their mothers or grandmothers had, due to lack of time, physical distance or other factors. However, any woman can learn personal coping strategies, or stress-handling techniques.

You can learn to use different coping strategies at different stages of the stress process. For example, individual or group counseling to learn about how and when stress happens can help you learn to predict stress and decided in advance how to avoid it or handle it.

You can try to change your perception of stress by redefining it, reframing it or changing the way you think about a situation, a process called "cognitive restructuring".



This can lead to the use of strategies that help you adapt to the situation that cannot be changed. These include relaxation techniques, limit-setting or using rehearsed scenarios in which you imagine in advance how a situation or conversation will go.

For stress that will probably not be resolved, you can cope with the situation to reduce your stress level by learning to identify the cause of the stress and applying stress-management techniques. Managing stress, as with most skills improves with practice. Your skills at meditation, biofeedback or practiced imagery all get better with repetition and use.

As a side benefit, relaxation therapy can be very successful as a supporting therapy in reducing high blood pressure. Research has repeatedly demonstrated exercise as a very effective means of relaxation.

Whatever techniques you choose as your personal stress-busters, the real trick is to stay with them and practice them regularly. Being able to muster a stress-relieving technique or two when necessary can help minimize or prevent the immediate physical reactions and symptoms you may experience when confronted with stress. In the longer view, positive coping strategies will help you avoid the negative behaviours that can cause lasting harm to your health.