

Address Your **Stress**: understanding stress and learning positive methods for reducing it.

I. Stress Forms: **Stress** may come in acute or chronic forms from one or both of these sources:

A. External: changes in life such as marriage, divorce, pregnancy, relocation, job promotion, job loss, etc; conflict in relationships, overloaded schedule, work demands, family needs, illness, loss, financial stress, etc...

B. Internal: pre-programming from family of origin resulting in life roles that are false and interfere with genuine life satisfaction. (These roles preserved the parent-child bond but were not meant for adult living); self-doubting or self-defeating messages that result from your pre-programming; poor internal boundaries (also learned from family of origin); the actual event does not cause stress; it's what you think about the event that determines stress.

II. Stress and Gender Reactions:

A. 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.

We are all familiar with the idea of "fight or flight" in response to stress. But recent research has taught us that males tend to respond to stress in that manner. Females are more likely to deal with stress by "**tending and befriending**" (nurturing those around them and reaching out to others). Tending involves "nurturing" 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.

B. Why do women tend and befriend instead of fight or flight? The reason, in large part, is **oxytocin** combined with female reproductive hormones. Oxytocin is a hormone secreted by the pituitary gland that seems to be involved in reproductive behavior in both men and women, and apparently triggers "caring" behavior. Oxytocin is also the hormone which allows contractions of the womb during pregnancy and labor.

C. Men, on the other hand, with smaller amounts of oxytocin, tend to act primarily on epinephrine and cortisol, which results in the fight or flight response when it comes to stress -- either bottling it up and escaping, or fighting back.

D. 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 cause differing reactions for women and for men.

E. A woman, is often at risk of letting other people's needs determine her limits, while her own needs are ignored. Inappropriate self-sacrifice in relationships is how many women enter stress.

F. 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. Achieving a winning performance at all costs is how many men enter stress.

G. What is the greatest stressor for women and for men? Relationship loss for women, performance failure for men, are often the greatest stressors each sex experiences. It is primarily the quality of her relationships that keeps a woman's stress levels down.

III. Good News! You were born with a built-in **Stress warning system: It's like having an emotional taste bud system**

Phase 1: Thoughts: such as “I am so stressed out!” “I’m too busy” “I can’t handle one more thing!” “I must not upset anyone” “I can’t say no – that’s just the way I am” - ***Ignore these and you may experience...***

Phase 2: Feelings: such as feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, angry, tense, nervous, sad, etc. - ***Ignore these and you may experience...***

Phase 3: Physical Pain: such as headaches, neck, shoulder or other muscle tension, stomach and back pain - ***Ignore these and you may experience...***

Phase 4: Physical or Emotional Illness: Lowered immune system makes you more susceptible to common illnesses due to virus, allergies and bacteria. Symptoms of depression and anxiety or other emotional illness may also surface – ***Ignore these and you may experience...***

Phase 5: Chronic Illness or Diseases: such as physical diseases like heart disease, cancer, IBS, ulcers, autoimmune diseases, etc. or emotional diseases such as Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, addiction, etc. **Do we have to speculate on what Phase 6 is???**

Increase your AWARENESS of your “emotional taste bud system” and learn to trust it and allow it to guide you to better self-care.

IV. Positive and Effective Methods of Addressing/Reducing Your Stress:

A. The most important way to address your stress is to be **PROACTIVE**: Develop a lifestyle that involves stress reducing awareness, activities and skills every day. Design a lifestyle that encourages production of oxytocin and limits production of cortisol and other stress producing hormones.

B. Second you must learn to **REACT EFFECTIVELY**: acknowledge your thoughts and feelings (Phases 1 and 2) and add activities or utilize skills to reduce stress if you notice it cropping up.

C. Here are some ACTIVITIES a woman can engage in to increase oxytocin by treating herself: getting a massage, her hair done, a manicure/pedicure, a facial, a night out with her girlfriends, a friendly telephone conversation, exercising or meditate while walking, scheduling a walk and talk with a friend, working out with a personal trainer, taking a yoga class, taking a dancing class, listening to music, singing in the shower, plant fragrant flowers in the garden, buy fresh-cut flowers, go to a farmer's market, hold a baby, read a good book, hire a handyman, plan special occasions to look forward to, etc.

D. Here are some HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES/SKILLS that increase your good chemicals (oxytocin, dopamine) and address stress: You can start practicing these tips right away. Try one or two until you find a few that work for you. Practice these techniques until they become self-care habits you turn to when you feel stress. Stress-relief techniques focus on relaxing your mind and your body.

1. Ways to relax your mind

a. Write. It may help to write about things that are bothering you. Write for 10 to 15 minutes a day about stressful events and how they made you feel. Or think about starting a stress journal. This helps you find out what is causing your stress and how much stress you feel. After you know, you can find better ways to cope.

b. Let your feelings out. Talk, laugh, cry, and express anger when you need to. Talking with friends, family, a counselor, or a member of the clergy about your feelings is a healthy way to relieve stress.

c. Do something you enjoy. This can be a hobby, such as gardening; a creative activity, such as writing, crafts, or art; playing with and caring for pets; volunteer work.

You may feel that you're too busy to do these things. But making time to do something you enjoy can help you relax. It might also help you get more done in other areas of your life.

d. Focus on the present. Meditation and guided imagery are two ways to focus and relax your mind.

e. Pray or Meditate. When you pray you are lifting your concerns off of your shoulders, experiencing gratitude or worshipping. When you meditate, you focus your attention on things

that are happening right now. Paying attention to your breathing is one way to focus. (Refer to handout regarding mindfulness meditation)

f. Use hypnosis or guided imagery. With hypnosis and/or guided imagery, you imagine yourself in any setting that helps you feel calm and relaxed. You can use audiotapes, books, or a teacher to guide you.

g. Establish boundaries in your life. Keep life simple with fewer obligations, activities and less financial distress.

2. Ways to relax your body

a. Exercise. Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress. Walking is a great way to get started. Even everyday activities such as housecleaning or yard work can reduce stress. Stretching can also relieve muscle tension.

b. Try techniques to relax. Breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, and yoga can help relieve stress.

c. Breathing exercises. These include the 3-4-5 technique we practiced today.

d. Progressive muscle relaxation. This technique reduces muscle tension. You do it by relaxing separate groups of muscles one by one.

e. Yoga, tai chi, and qi gong. These techniques combine exercise and meditation. You may need some training at first to learn them. Books and videos are also helpful. You can do all of these techniques at home.

