

# Women and Stress

## Are We Different from Men?

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**M**ost of us will agree that women and men differ in many of life's contexts because their physiological and general emotional makeup produces contrasting responses to environmental situations. In a world where stress touches most lives, how do women and men compare to reacting to or managing stress?



According to a survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), more women admit that they are stressed than do men: 37% of women as compared to 31% of men. Does this mean they are under more stress daily? Or do they experience stress symptoms to a greater degree than their male counterparts? Or maybe they handle stress differently than do men? Perhaps men are less likely to admit when they are under stress.

Symptoms of stress tend to differ between the genders. An article by Men n Stuff (October 2020), stated that women under stress are more likely than men to experience anxiety, migraines, depression, insomnia, panic, post-traumatic stress disorders, and chronic pain among others. Men have higher chances of contracting infectious diseases and hypertension in response to stress, which can lead to cardiovascular disease. A man is more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, and to exhibit aggressive behavior.

Research has shown that the effects of hormones are the predominant driving force behind the stress response differences between the sexes. Men react to stress by producing cortisol and adrenaline, which create the “fight or flight” response. In the case of women, in addition to cortisol and adrenaline, their bodies also produce oxytocin. Oxytocin is a chemical that promotes affection and bonding with others.

Women respond to stress by “tending and befriending”, whereby they seek to protect others in their lives as well as reaching for social connection and support. Sheba Global (no date) calls this reaction, “treat and nurture”. Secretion of oxytocin is the primary reason why women don't demonstrate the “fight or flight” tendency as readily or as frequently as men. Oxytocin plays a role in lowering cortisol levels, and blood pressure and can induce anti-stress-like effects.

Despite the calming influence of oxytocin, women still stress. Perhaps the “calming” addition of oxytocin to the mix is what results in women being more likely to manage stress by seeking supportive relationships with family, friends, and professional counselors. It's as if they hit the pause button, taking a “breather” to figure out what is happening and what might be done.

Also, it's possible, as offered by Sheba Global, that the biological life experiences of women, such as pregnancy, nursing, and childcare may naturally lead them to seek intimate contact and emotional expression. It is an established fact that in the case of stress, women are more likely to choose treatment, friendship, and sharing their feelings with others in order to cope.

As for men, as mentioned, their stress reaction involves the symptoms of “fight or flight”. A release of the stress hormones

leads to physiological changes, such as a pounding heart, tense muscles, sweating and rapid breathing. Corresponding behaviors may include anger or argumentativeness: the “fight” response. For others, they may emotionally grapple with feelings of helplessness, anxiety and frustration, leading them to retreat into a bad mood or to sleep as a way of escape: the “flight” response. In a more positive sense, they often seek an escape activity such as a sport, creating a relaxing diversion from what is troubling them. In contrast to women, they will not discuss their feelings or stress among themselves.

A primary influence on stress effects and coping mechanisms is self-esteem. Men are known to build their self-esteem around the adequacy of performance, while women’s self-esteem is built around relationships. The most significant stressors for men and women are performance failure and relationship loss, respectively. (Men n Stuff)

Men let challenge and competition set the pace for them, that is their rival’s efforts or the plan of their employer. They tend to preoccupy themselves with winning or attaining an extrinsic objective. The determination to obtain a winning performance drives most men to stress.

A woman may sometimes let other people’s needs determine her limits while ignoring her own. I will add that this may not only apply to the needs of her children, husband, or close friends but also carry over to the needs of the workplace to include mission, coworkers and boss. In the process, the self-sacrifice in relationships leads a woman to stress.

So, are women more susceptible or prone to experience stress as mentioned in the APA survey above? That’s probably another topic for discussion. Given the fact that hormonal influences predispose men to fight or flight, and the added oxytocin seems to temper

women’s response to stress, one would be inclined to think that women handle stress better. Then again, both groups do exhibit physical and mental conditions or illnesses



related to stress. And don’t forget about the influence of culture and/or individual upbringing that may be at work as well in determining the stress response in men versus women.

In successful workforces, it goes without saying that happy and productive employees bring success, even when stress is involved. **Solushiens** knows how to come to understand people and leadership dynamics and places these principles at the forefront as we help businesses optimize talent. We bring calm and clarity to every engagement.

#### References:

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