



## **THINK YOU'RE STRESSED?**

Kevin S. Merigian, M.D.'s thoughts about what he has learned from his patients.

Maybe it's difficult to admit, but men and women are hard-wired differently when it comes to stress. Despite the idea of gender equality and feminism, scientists are proving over and over again that women feel more day to day stress and anxiety than men. Why?

Women tend to have more roles in their households than men. Think about it: mother, spouse, housekeeper, employee, caretaker and friend, constant juggling of roles, sometimes all of them at once. Many of our female patients struggle to balance these roles and feel they fall short of being good in all of them. Despite these feelings of guilt, they forge ahead, creating even more stress. Women are much more vulnerable to both physical threats and fears than most men. Have you picked up a beauty magazine at the supermarket lately? It's enough to make any successful woman feel like a failure.

The collective consciousness of women seems to dictate that for a woman to consider herself successful and happy she must be in a good relationship, be



enjoyed by her kids, her friends have to like her, her job needs to be going well, and don't forget: her house has to be really clean. Oh, one last thing: she has to be thin!

Two qualities are most outstanding in women: 1) They know how to nurture others; 2) They seem to defer to others instead of caring for themselves. Scientists have shown through research that there is more interconnection between the areas of women's brains than men's. So what? Well, women have all their senses working all the time. Even when women appear focused in a conversation, they are very aware of everything going on around them. Not only are they aware of them, they are processing them and relating to each episode. Men are much more uni-focal. Nature naturally creates this awareness to help a mother protect her children. Unfortunately, it can't be easily turned off, even if the children aren't involved.

Men and women respond to stress by hormonal mechanisms. Men tend to arouse in a fight or flight situation. They take action. Some are aggressive, some are risk takers, and some withdraw. Women, on the other hand, are more apt to "tend or befriend". They are much more likely to seek emotional comfort or give it. They



contact friends or relatives. Some of them find others to nurture or care for, citing that they feel better when helping others.

I have witnessed another rather distinctive response: they find relief from stress by eating large amounts of sugar. "Comfort food" is the term used most commonly. It should go without saying that consuming large amounts of refined carbohydrates is fraught with all sorts of medical illnesses: abdominal weight, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes mellitus and breast cancer to name a few. I suspect that women experience bone mineral loss, breakdown of their immune systems and impaired memory as a result of stress and improper eating.

What can I recommend to all those women who read this? It's no surprise: eating well is probably the most important. What else? Move. Move a lot. Walk, run, exercise. Try to find some physical activity you enjoy and do it. The Greeks said it best, "Everything in moderation". What else? Pick yourself up from every fall, dust yourself off and get back at it. It's always better to bounce than break. Oh, one last thing – don't be so righteous about everything. Translation: Don't sweat the small stuff!



I have counseled many women on caring for themselves before others. Most women have different needs. They are the only ones who know what their needs are. Discover your needs, and find those who can help you meet them. Find a way to nurture yourself without guilt. Do it without hesitating. Do it with the compassion you use for others. The rest of your world will fall into place.