



Pharmacy Focus

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Work-Life Balance/Family Career Balance

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Stress can be positive or negative. When stress sparks personal achievement or life enjoyment and appreciation (positive stress), it can support us to feel enthusiastic, creative and productive, motivating us. But stress can easily spiral out of control, becoming overwhelming and negative distress, taking its toll on your physical and emotional health and wellbeing if we don't carefully balance all aspects of our lives: work, relationships including family and friends, personal growth, playtime and fun.

Stress is not an illness, but it can lead to specific physical and emotional symptoms, often serious enough to send people to the emergency room or their health care practitioner's office. According to the American Psychological Association, 43% of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress, and 75 - 90 % of all visits to a doctor are stress related. Women are experiencing more stress at every stage of life than ever before. Juggling professional life, education needs, family schedules, financial challenges, career advancement, child- and elder-care concerns, are only a few of the common stress triggers confronting women.

Responses to stress

The classical *fight-or-flight* response to stress has been written about and researched since the 1960's. Recent research added another perspective to the stress response. Women react differently under stress than men do: using the *'tend-and-befriend'* response, as coined by Shelly Taylor, PhD, women (and female animals from all species) experiencing stress tend to nurture themselves and their young and form bonds with others. Women also have the classical *fight-or-flight* response under stress, but the *tend-and-befriend* response seems to take effect during long term chronic stress, with women responding differently from men. Female animals need to protect their young in a stressful situation – as did our ancestors and ourselves even today, when physically threatened. Fleeing too soon might leave a young animal defenseless.

Hormonal factors in the two sexes also play a role in the different reactions to stress. Males under stress produce androgens such as testosterone (making them more aggressive when under stress) in addition to stress hormones such as adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol. Studies suggest that women produce oxytocin, which produces a feeling of relaxation, reduces fear, and decreases some components of the fight-or-flight response. Oxytocin is also involved in childbirth and social interaction. In the past, stress behaviour like aggression and withdrawal have been studied, while important behaviours like bonding and affiliation, have been totally

overlooked. Calling on your friends when you're stressed, might be a modern manifestation of one of the oldest biological stress response systems in human beings!

What is work-life balance?

It's the eternal striving for balance between work and the rest of your life. Is 100% balance possible? No! But you can try to the best of your ability to get as close to perfect balance as possible. The top stress complaints heard regularly are family or marital problems, deadlines, work related stress, fatigue and a sense that life seems unsatisfactory and unbalanced. Of course, all of these are often closely related. We simply feel that there's never enough time and energy or we don't know what to do to 'fix' things. Short of having oneself cloned, something's bound to draw the shortest end of the straw. Usually it's personal or family life. Work is the easy winner. The good news is that radical lifestyle changes aren't required. Standing back, trying to see the bigger picture, then making one or two small, personally strategic changes, are often all that's necessary.

Why do we need this balance?

If we consider the dimensions of our ideal lives, we have to include the physical body, the mental body or intellect, the emotional body, the soul body, the occupational or work dimension, the social dimension of interaction with others and also the environmental dimension, where we form part of a bigger picture, from communities to the natural, global and universal environment. To remain in balance, therefore healthy, happy and joyfully alive, we have to allocate enough time to each of these dimensions. As soon as one is out of balance, the scale tips and we become overwhelmed and distressed.

Both men and women experience stress with its related health problems and risk implications. Most, if not all illnesses and ailments have an underlying current of long term stress at the source. Women have other stress concerns than men. Women often feel overwhelmed from trying to balance work and family, feeling stressed if either one suffers. Most women regard themselves as successful only if they have a good family and career life. Men, on the other hand, will feel good about themselves even if only their careers are going well. Most women return home to a second stint after the day's work and have to cope with home and children's demands. Women's stress levels therefore tend to rise at quitting time, where men's will show a decline. Women's symptoms of stress include fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, overeating, insomnia, digestive problems, dysthymia (mild depression) or serious depression, rashes and other skin complaints. But the rate

of women with heart disease and alcoholism (previously thought of as the men's stress diseases) show an alarming increase.

Working mothers, regardless of whether they are married or single, face higher stress levels than men in the workplace as well as at home. Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems.

Stress can cause a variety of physical ailments, from headache to symptoms that mimic a heart attack. In addition, stress can cause depression and anxiety. Stress might even trigger illness, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes mellitus, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, severe menopausal symptoms and asthma.

Managing your energy for work-life balance: Practise mindfulness

On waking, spend a few moments lying in bed. Enjoy the delight of the fresh morning air, the sparkle of early sunlight, the sound of birds. Sense the life flowing through your body. Notice your breath, the pulsing of blood in your fingertips, the tug of gravity upon your arms, legs, and back. Take a few deep slow breaths. This is a good time to write in your journal – dreams, thoughts, ideas, feelings.

Get out of bed slowly, observing the shift in your centre of balance as you move into an upright position. Stand erect, without strain. Feel your feet on the ground. Become aware of your whole body, stretching fully. Cultivate serenity early in the morning and carry the feeling with you throughout the day. We control how we respond to irritations, worries, doubts and fears. Preparing the mind like this, calmly centres you throughout the day.

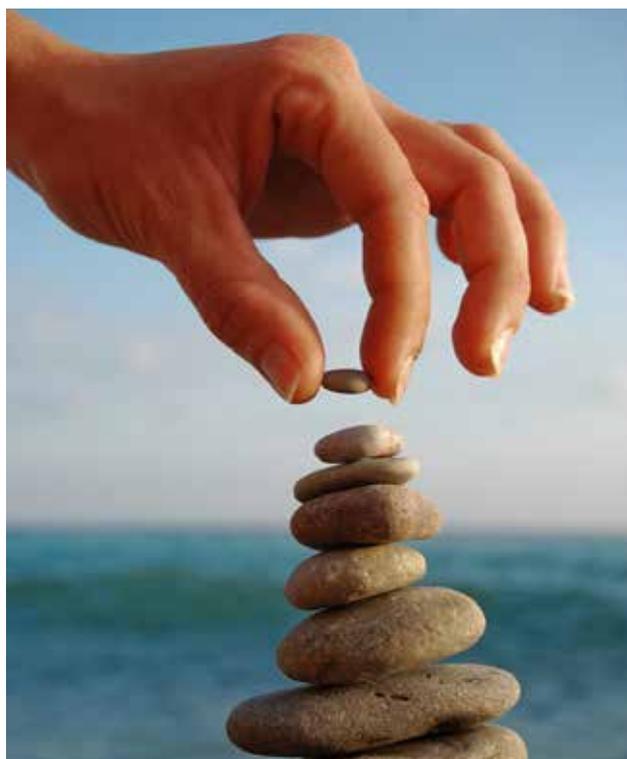
- You can eat, drink, or walk mindfully by focusing exclusively on eating, drinking, or walking.
- Stop and notice your breath at various times throughout the day.
- Cultivate a sense of being, rather than always feeling like you have to be doing something.

One minute stress busters

Breathe in deeply through your nose on a slow count of three. Push your stomach out as you breathe in. Hold it for a count of three. Breathe out through your mouth on a slow count of six. Repeat two or more times. Try this every time you feel stressed, anxious or worried. Do it every morning before you get up and every night before falling asleep. Feel your pulse rate by putting your fingers gently on your wrist below the thumb. When you're stressed, it's fast. Do the slow breathing and feel how your pulse rate slows down – a quick fix stress buster!

Tired eye soother

- Splash your eyes with cold water – alternate with a hot washcloth over your closed eyelids and press gently with your fingertips.



To remain in balance, therefore healthy, happy and joyfully alive, we have to allocate enough time to each of the dimensions of our ideal life.

- Rub an ice cube around each eye.
- Lie back in your chair or on a bed, place sliced cucumber or a wet tea bag over your closed eyes and relax for a few minutes.
- Do eye exercises: blink a few times, focus on objects far and then near you, move your eyes in a circle, keeping your head still, rub the palms of your hands vigorously together and place over your closed eyelids.

Support your body for internal balance

Have regular mini-breaks every 2 hours from sitting or standing to prevent your muscles from remaining in one position all the time. Breathe deeply, get up and stretch your neck, arms and shoulders, roll your shoulders clockwise and anticlockwise, clasp your hands behind your back and lift your arms, shake your legs, look out the window. This will prevent tension headaches and neck muscle spasm.

Exercise regularly. Find something you enjoy. Nia technique dance, yoga, tai 'chi, pilates, bellydancing, modern or pole dancing, taking walks in nature, are all different and enjoyable activities to try. The wellness definition of physical fitness is to obtain and maintain the ability to meet the needs of your lifestyle with ease.

Balancing food tips

- Prevent low blood sugar – it's a stress attractor! Eat regular, healthy, small meals. Always have fruit, vegetables, yoghurt, nuts and seeds handy!
- Sip away your stress: chamomile, mint, passionflower,

lemon balm, ginseng, lavender and valerian herbal teas, together with a spoonful of honey will soothe frazzled nerves.

- Calming foods: Tryptophan boosts the formation of serotonin, the 'feel good', calming brain chemical - eat unrefined, low GI carbohydrates, nuts and bananas.
- Energising foods: protein for example cheese, eggs, chicken and meat, contains the amino acid tryptamine that can give you a boost when stress tires you out. Take small ready prepared portions to work.
- Take a daily dose of vitamin B-complex to support your nervous system together with an antioxidant and multivitamin combination (vitamin A, E, C, minerals zinc, selenium, copper, chromium, iron, calcium and magnesium).
- Food for thought to improve brain power: Examples include beans, legumes, lean meat, whole grain and enriched cereals, poultry, fish such as trout, salmon, tuna, sardines and mackerel, dairy products, brewer's yeast, nuts, seeds, fruit, vegetables.

Listen to music to help you balance your mood. Uplifting music with a beat, when your mood is low. Slow and flowing when you feel overwhelmed and uptight by stress emotions like anger, fear, worry, anxiety.

Make sure to get sufficient rest for resilience and balance

A power nap during the mid afternoon lag in energy will do wonders for your balance and energy: lie down with your arms folded for 5 minutes and notice how refreshed you feel afterwards!

Manage techno stress by looking at the ergonomics of your computer screen, keyboard, chair, fresh air circulation and sufficient natural light. Take a break outside for fresh air therapy! Prevent information overload by taking week-end techno breaks: cell phones off, laptops hidden from view, don't watch the news. Learn to switch off, unwind, relax.

Relationships for balance

Make enough time for family and friends to comply with the social dimension needed for human health and happiness.

Start by first having a relationship with yourself

- Use positive self-talk and affirmations to remove doubt, fear and worry.
- Actively cultivate a sense of humour by watching comedies, reading joke books, laughing with your partner, family and friends.
- Know your own values, goals, priorities.
- Be assertive - learn how to ask for what you want or need.
- Set boundaries. We often allow loved ones to stretch us far beyond our limits because we find it harder to say no to children or partner. It's important to make time for family, but to also make time for yourself; for physical, mental and spiritual health.

Maintain relationship with others for social balance

- Build and maintain support systems by using the tend-and-befriend response.
- Invest in relationships with your spouse/partner, kids, friends, family, community, pets.
- Clear communication is the key to successful relationships.
- Intimacy develops through frequent contact and connection with others.
- If you're single and lonely, make an effort to meet people: join interest groups, attend group activities like yoga, workshops or dance classes, join creativity groups.

Balance is the key to work-life and stress management. Activity, productivity, creativity and self motivation should be balanced with quiet soul time, moderate exercise and regular relaxation time.

References available on request.



Take home message

- Not all stress is negative, but it can spiral out of control if all aspects of our lives are not carefully balanced.
- Men and women often respond differently to stress – women may have the 'tend and befriend' response in addition to the usual 'fight or flight' response.
- Unmanaged stress can lead to numerous health problems, ranging from headaches to heart disease.
- Make enough time for family and friends.
- Exercise regularly, ideally doing something that you enjoy.
- Slow deep breaths can be a quick fix stress buster.
- Eat regular healthy small meals to avoid low blood sugar levels.
- 'Calming foods' include nuts, bananas and unrefined low GI carbohydrates.
- A number of herbal teas assist in relieving stress
- Have a relationship with yourself, knowing your values, goals and priorities.