



FACT SHEET:

Stress – The Differences Between Men and Women

Both men and women are susceptible to psychological stress. There are, however, differences in the way in which men and women are conditioned to respond. Here are some generalised examples of different gender based traits and how they relate to the way men and women respond to stress.

For years the human stress response has been described in terms of 'fight or flight' reactions. This is when a surge of hormones are released in response to a highly stressful situation, preparing the body to either deal with (fight) or run away from (flight) the stressful situation. Recent research suggests that this 'fight or flight' response theory is based on data conducted mainly in men, and that women have evolved to manage stress differently.

This 'new' stress response is described as the 'tend and befriend' response. The scientific theory has found that women produce alternative hormones that may downplay the 'fight or flight' response. They describe how women have developed stress responses that nurture and protect their offspring from harm (tending) and create and engage in social groups for protection (befriending).

There are ongoing studies that are aiming to define the difference in male and female stress responses. Here are some generalised examples of gender-based traits and how they influence the way men and women respond to stress.

MEN:

Men are often good and fixers and problem solvers.

Some guys don't readily emote or discuss their feelings.

STRESS RESPONSES:

It's difficult sometimes to fix a feeling and consequently some men struggle to accept their emotions. They will either fight or run away from their feelings by avoiding or distracting themselves easily. Some men seek to escape stress through participation in sports, the gym, clubs, internet, gambling etc.

They can isolate themselves and internalise their stress.



MEN:

STRESS RESPONSES:

Men tend to be more focused on performance and competition.

The worst kind of stress for many men is the inability to perform, compete and achieve. The experience or perception of failure is difficult to accept.

Some men struggle to identify and read their own and their partner's' emotions

They can struggle to engage in close relationships, instead becoming withdrawn or more controlling.

Men can generally be more physically focused.

They experience bodily felt sensations and physical health problems as signs of psychological stress, e.g. back pain, neck and shoulder pain, heart disease.

WOMEN:

STRESS RESPONSES:

Women, generally, are nurturers and will reach out to others to protect themselves

They seek out support to lower their anxieties in order to find solutions or answers to their problems.

Women tend to focus on relationship building

They have a befriending response in that they share stress and naturally connect with others.

Some women's sense of adequacy can be measured up in their relationships.

This can create a risk to their self-esteem by becoming too caught up in the dilemma of a lack of self-care and over demand in their relationships.

Women often sacrifice their own needs for the needs of others.

Other peoples' needs may govern a woman's stress levels while ignoring her own needs.

Managing Stress

Whilst responses to stress can be complex and differ for men and women, stress management needs are the same for both. There are a variety of ways of managing stress including 'inner work' such as yoga and meditation or exercise, diet and a healthy sleep regimen. Some practical steps in managing stress include the following tips:

1. If you are overwhelmed, cannot cope, have suicidal thoughts or are using alcohol and drugs to cope, seek out professional help.
2. For new or existing physical health problems get qualified health care.
3. Recognise the physical signs of your body's response to stress, such as difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol or other substance use, or having low energy.
4. Prioritise tasks and set limits for what you can and can't do.
5. Note your accomplishments at the end of each day.
6. Exercise regularly, preferably daily.
7. Schedule relaxation and down time on a regular basis throughout the week.

Stress Itself Is Not Damaging, It's The Way We Respond To It That Matters.

Part of the solution is to appreciate how you and your partner may differ in reaction to stress. Being aware and accepting of your limitations and demands can support you to acknowledge, identify and alleviate stress in your life.



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