



Men & Stress

by award-winning author / stress-relief expert **Susie Mantell**

Note: I make few generalizations here that are not absolutes now intended as sexist. No disgruntled emails, please. :-)

Do any of these sound familiar?

- *"Big boys don't cry. Be a man about it!"*
- *"Never let 'em see you sweat."*
- *"Real men don't _____." (fill in the blank)*
- *"I don't get ulcers, I give them!"*

I think it is revealing that a few years ago when I sought content about men's stress, it was no simple task locating credible sources on the panoply of unique pressures men face, nor helpful coping strategies for men's emotional challenges.

Dozens of articles the referenced the relationship of men to stress spoke solely of one aspect: The risk of heart disease. Indeed, heart disease is a well-documented stress-related health risk for both men and women. Reducing stress is widely understood to be vital in preventing, or living with, heart disease. Today there are more resources specific to Combat Stress in men, and to a link to obesity, but compared to the abundance of resources available for women coping with stress, the lack of readily accessible information for men on how they experience and process stress speaks volumes about the problem itself.

So far, where stress is concerned, men are getting the short end of the self-help stick. Men and women are different genetically and culturally. We are also similar in many ways of course, but men and women differ in some ways that may influence specifically what stresses us, and how we cope.

Historically women have more experience, and more support when it comes to talking freely about the stress they experience. In literature, damsels in distress have even held a kind of charm, pathetic as that sounds today. Conversely, many boys are conditioned from an early age to express only emotions that demonstrate strength, courage and confidence. There's often an expectation for men to act aggressively in sports, in traffic, in the workplace, and even in romance. They learn to hide fear and vulnerability away so effectively that by the time a man discovers that a full range of emotions actually promotes health and happier relationships, he no longer can recall where he stowed them away at the age of six. The hunter-gatherer instinct serves men well in many ways, but the stress of such unbalanced and unrealistic expectations may affect him, and everyone around him .

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"We've Come a Long Way, Baby. " (Now What?)

Men and women are not the same, but perhaps we're less different in some ways than was previously believed. For centuries, cultures rewarded a man for risk-taking and pushing himself past fear or physical pain but today, lifestyle choices are broadening as the concept of manhood evolves to include such non-traditional experiences as primary childcare, spa vacations and yoga.

I've always thought "*The Women's Movement*" was a grossly inaccurate name for a cascade of shifts in cultural mores that so profoundly impacted men as well. I recall a friend in the 1970's confiding, "*For 20 years I was taught to believe I'd be spending my life with someone like Donna Reed. I went off to college looking for Mary Stone, emerging four years later to discover that "Mary," now starting her MBA, was undecided about "the baby thing" and hung her garter belt beside her black belt.*" He found many of those changes admirable and loved having a strong partner with goals, opinions and dreams of her own -- plus an MBA! His wife went on to be an attorney while they raised three daughters together, however the sexual revolution caught many unprepared. As doors blew open and women began filing through them, men had more options too. Some chose not to marry. Others chose to be more involved in their children's day-to-day lives and found themselves balancing new roles at work and at home. While social conventions in contemporary society include less dragon-slaying per se, modern culture challenges today's men to "do battle" in more subtle ways.

Ambrose Redmoon said, "*Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.*" In what used to be exclusively men's roles, the extraordinary courage and selflessness demonstrated by rescue workers, first responders and everyday heroes bring to light in poignant and immediate ways our profound admiration for these men and women, as well as appreciation for their hearts and souls, and the tears they've shed. The respect and admiration we express following a courageous disaster response also honor the profound authenticity of heroic actions, and expressions of their own emotion following the event. Today, heroism often includes not simply brute strength or reflexive response to peril, but also the human emotions inherent therein.

Been "In The Cave" Just a Little Too Long?

Withdrawal under stress is not a uniquely male phenomenon, but in the book, "*Men are from Mars/Women Are from Venus*," John Gray explains the need of many men to periodically retreat within themselves to "the cave," to get a little alone time to mull, ponder, and work things through. Women who understand this know "the cave" has a permanent Do Not Disturb sign posted, and eventually their men will likely emerge calmer, happier, and ready to reconnect. When men do emerge, it's helpful to be with loved ones and good friends again, and remind them that they appreciate the time and space given when it was needed.

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Taking Your Job "To Heart?"

Q: "Dear Susie, Working long days at a stressful job, I've been diagnosed with high blood-pressure. I seem to have lost the ability to relax. Help?"

A: Indeed, it seems your work-related stress has seeped into corners of your personal life, where it does not belong. This is common among people who are conscientious and take their responsibilities seriously. But you are literally taking your responsibilities "to heart" . Remember: Do your job well, but first, care for your health. Get fully evaluated by a trusted physician who is knowledgeable about the many conditions that cause, and result from, high blood-pressure. Worrying about blood pressure isn't for one's blood pressure. Choose someone who will listen, help you to understand what is going on, offer wise guidance and comforting relief.

A Few More Suggestions for Busting Stress:

- Call up an old friend today and plan something fun. Choose friends you can trust with your thoughts, your mistakes and your dreams.
- Get moderate, pleasurable exercise. Enjoy the comforting buoyancy of swimming.
- Go for a drive, visit a museum or garden or go to the zoo.
- Organize your workspace. (*This one's more fun afterwards.*)
- Take yourself to a funny movie or watch some entertaining, stress-less TV.
- Visit the library as if you'd never been to one before. Libraries are amazing.
- Do something for someone else.
- Go out for a healthy, delicious meal. Try an adult ed. class that is not work-related.
- Get hugged.
- Take a long, hot bath. Try acupuncture, massage or other body or energy work.
- Order tickets to a concert. Start a new hobby or sport.
- Listen to music you love --or make some -- or dance
- Listen to a deeply soothing CD like "*Your Present: A Half-Hour of Peace*" at bedtime each night.
- Try short-term counseling to explore ways to re-balance, and let all non-essential stress go.

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