

Tend and Befriend Instead of Fight or Flight A Woman's Response to Stress

"Tend and Befriend" refers to a new awareness that is helping more and more women understand and reduce their own stress levels. It gives us a broader and more accurate description of women's stress than the traditionally accepted "Fight or Flight" ever could. We all know, from our experience that men and women react differently to stressful events. Until recently, however, these differences have been largely ignored by researchers and professionals who study stress and anxiety.

It is reported that two female scientists at UCLA, Dr. Shelley Taylor and Dr. Laura Cousino Klein, joked that when the women at the lab were stressed, they cleaned up the lab, joined each other for coffee and felt better. The men, on the other hand, went off by themselves to spend their time in solitude.

This made them question the traditional notion of fight or flight, and whether it really could be applied to men and women alike. As further inspiration, they realized that nearly ninety percent of all stress research had been done only on men.

The researchers considered the physical differences between men and women and the different functions they have historically had in regard to their children and families. They noted that until recently, women have spent most of their childbearing years pregnant, breastfeeding or caring for very young children.

They reasoned that fighting or fleeing may not have been the most effective way for women to handle a danger and that this response could have put them and their children at greater risk.

Blending in to the surroundings, keeping the children quiet or joining together for strength in numbers would probably have been a more successful way to handle danger. They wondered, then, if there might be biological factors that would encourage women towards these behaviors.

They, along with three other colleagues, believed that this issue warranted further study and decided to delve into the matter.

They met with scientist from various specialties and scoured available research results. They presented their findings in the year 2000 to *Psychological Review*, a professional journal.

Good News for Women. Tend and Befriend

From their research, they concluded is that women DO have the fight or flight reaction that men have, BUT we have an additional response that frequently overrides it. During times of danger or threat women have a drive that compels them to protect their young and form alliances. They named it the **Tend and Befriend** response.

What they determined is that the amazing and versatile little hormone of oxytocin plays a key role in this tend and befriend process. Oxytocin, the hormone that is prominent during breastfeeding, childbirth AND also during orgasm, is released during times of stress. (I did say it was versatile!)

Oxytocin, they reported, has a calming effect and creates in us, a strong desire to nurture, protect and build relationships. Then in response to the nurturing, protecting and relationship building more oxytocin is released and this brings on stronger feelings of calm and well being.

Because of this, caring for others (especially our children) and establishing interpersonal relationships tends to be very satisfying and appealing to women.

By the way, men also produce oxytocin, but their higher level of testosterone minimizes the effect. On the other hand, estrogen, of which women have an abundance, strengthens the effects of oxytocin.

An important discovery is that oxytocin was found to reduce stress levels, so women actually experience less anxiety in many situations than men do. Oxytocin blocks some of the damaging effects of our stress hormones, which in part, explain women's overall better health.

Women's Stress Today

So why is it that we commonly hear how much stress women are under? Why do most mental health agencies and sources report that women suffer anxiety disorders more than men?

First, we probably don't. My observation is that women **recognize and report** anxiety more frequently than men. Stress frequently impairs women's ability to function in areas that are most important to them. The common anxiety symptoms, such as impatience, irritability, forgetfulness and withdrawal from others are likely to be more distressing to women and therefore, they are more likely to seek treatment.

Second, our modern life frequently prevents our ability to Tend and Befriend, so we may be cut off from our natural sources of stress relief.

We are often away from our children long hours and when we are with them, our time is filled with hurried activities. This makes it difficult to engage in the type of "tending" that produces oxytocin.

Many of us do not have a network of female friends. We have less time to devote to friendships and fewer opportunities to develop them. The neighborhood community of moms has disappeared in most places. We have fewer women available to "befriend".

What to Do

Make close, nurturing activities with your children a priority. Increase the amount of physical contact you have with them. It is good for ALL of you.

Set time aside for things that lend themselves to snuggling, such as reading, watching movies or cartoons together, giving back rubs, etc. Make the conscious effort to give children real hugs--not hurried ones--hugs that last 10 seconds or more.

Keep in mind that it is not "Tend and Tend and Tend". Take the time to enjoy the effects of the oxytocin, so you can reap its real benefits. Give yourself a chance to relax and experience the sense of well being that comes from this natural health-inducing hormone.

Don't expect your husband to meet all of your emotional needs, especially during times of stress. Demands for closeness during times of stress may actually create more anxiety for men. Your husband's body responds differently than yours, because historically, his function has been different than yours.

His reaction to a threat (emotional, physical, ego) is Fight or Flight. Don't expect him to have the tend and befriend response that you have. Just because moving closer to you during times of stress may not come naturally to him, does not mean that he doesn't love you.

Befriending makes up half of tend and befriend, so do not under estimate the importance of relationships with other women. YOU NEED THESE. Nurture your friendships. Consider joining groups, if practical (school, neighborhood, church, volunteer committees, etc.) The time they take up may be worth it, if the social aspects give you stress relief.

Take Care of Yourself. As women, we are gifted with this natural and healthy way to relieve stress. Make full use of your tend and befriend process. Do what you can to activate it. Observe what makes you feel good. Pay attention to how you feel after various activities and commit to doing more of what makes you feel relaxed and happy.

You can read the full length original article on Tend and Befriend at:

<http://www.findem.com.au/resources/tendandbefriend.pdf>. It is lengthy and somewhat technical, but not too technical. It is very interesting