

BMH Specialist talks about how women, men handle stress

By Shaun O'Malley
of The Daily Times Staff

Everyone encounters a stressful situation in their life, but the most important thing to remember is how to deal with that stressful situation when it does develop.

Sarah Wimmer, a certified health education specialist, said in her recent seminar *Men and Women: Differences in Managing Stress*, that the most important thing when dealing with stress is to remember that stress is caused by some type of stressor in life and that this stressor can be from pressure, change or conflict.

Stress is the physiological change that occurs in the body when a person encounters a stressor in their life. Stressors, according to Wimmer, come in two types. They are distress, which is from an unpleasant stressor, and eustress, which is from a pleasant stressor.

No matter the type of stressor, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, they both create changes to the body which the body must learn to adapt to those changes.

In the past, men have been the primary study for how stressors affect the body; however the main catch with these studies, according to Wimmer, is that they are also applied to women. In more recent studies, it has been found that women and men react differently to stressors and that the men's results cannot be used to assume that is how women will react.

In fact, usually when it comes to stress-related issues that lead to anger, men usually get stressed out when they feel threatened, while women get stressed out when they think about the injustices of the world such as poverty.

The original model when dealing with stress revolves around the age-old mantra of fight or flight. When the body encounters a stressor, it releases chemicals to adapt to these changes in the body such as adrenaline.

Shelly Taylor and Laura Kline performed a study at the University of California Los Angeles that ultimately changes the theory of fight or flight.

In their study, they propose that men typically have the normal fight or flight response to a stressor because of the release of the chemicals of adrenaline and testosterone, whereas in women, the hormone oxytocin is released instead of testosterone which produces an entirely different affect.

When men become stressed out they tend to either initiate conversation or they go off by themselves. The release of adrenaline in men, when they encounter stress, causes their cholesterol and blood pressure to go up, and their immune system weakens.

The release of testosterone keeps men revved up and in a fight mentality.

The study, in women though, showed that because the hormone oxytocin is released, that women ultimately do not fall into the typical fight or flight pattern because of the effects oxytocin has on the body.

Instead of fight or flight, women take on a new model termed tend or befriend. Oxytocin, known as the love and bonding hormone, causes a decrease in anxiety, helps manage pain, and lowers blood pressure.

Women are also less prone to stress-related illnesses because oxytocin helps strengthen the immune system of women when they are in stressful situations. When women encounter stressors, according to this study, they tend instead of fighting or fleeing the scene, they look at tending to someone or befriending someone.

The key to managing stress, according to Wimmer, is not necessarily based upon the fight or flight vs. tend or befriend method though, because she says the importance is how the stressors are viewed are the key to how to manage them.

Perception, she says, is very important.

Wimmer explained Lazarus' Stress Hardiness, which claims that people handle stress based upon their vulnerability.

This vulnerability can come in several different categories such as physical health (eating well, staying physically fit), social health (a network of people to help cope with stress), and resources (the money and means to deal with stress).

Wimmer says a great way to manage stress is to choose several affirmations or positive self-statements and post them in places. She says when you feel like you are getting to stressed out, pull out the affirmations and read them aloud and focus on them.

The important thing is to trust yourself and believe you can handle it.

The seminar Men and Women: Differences in Managing Stress was presented by Wimmer, who is in her 11th year as a health education specialist. Wimmer is the Hospice volunteer coordinator at Blount Memorial Hospital and she works closely with the Blount Memorial Hospital Cancer Center to offer free seminars to the public.

Upcoming seminars include a Lunch and Learn that will inform patients about signing up for cancer clinical trials and will be presented by Aubrey Waddell on Jan. 23 at the Blount Memorial Cancer Center conference room.

For more information about upcoming programs and events, check out the Blount Memorial Hospital Web site at www.blountmemorial.org.

(Final copy that ran in the newspaper and posted on the website at

<http://www.thedailytimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070121/WOMEN/701170328&SearchID=73280510111375>)