

Health

Stressed Out? Find Some 'Me' Time

Heidi Brown, 01.23.09, 05:20 PM EST

Research shows more women than men are stressed about the economy. Are women suffering from stress addiction?

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As net worths nosedive and layoffs loom, everyone is feeling anxious. But from an emotional standpoint, it's disproportionately women who are taking the hit. In fact, a recent poll from the American Psychological Association found that 25% more women than men feel stressed about the economy.

You might think that women need to find more minutes to squeeze into the day--not deduct them for "me" time, right? Not exactly. Now more than ever, women need to

figure out ways to take care of themselves.

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Experts are concerned about damage to women's health from failing to make themselves a priority. You may have heard that excessive stress produces cortisol, which can cause weight gain and even heart problems. But did you know that stress can cause dementia-like symptoms?

Cortisol build-up can create memory loss and a lower attention span, says Sandra Chapman, the director of the Center for Brain Health at the University of Texas at Dallas. "It's particularly toxic to the memory area of the brain," she says.







The APA study found that women tend to report higher levels of stress in general and have a higher tendency to feel they aren't doing enough to manage it. There are a number of reasons why stress impacts women more than men. Most of it has to do with women's tendency to feel responsible for those around them.

When Rat Race Rebellion, a Web site geared toward work-life balance, asked women why they can't turn down favors, the top reason was--"I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or make them mad at me." Second to that: "They're showing faith in me and I can't let them down."

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Women tend to say to the world, "Look what I can do," since they've been raised to please others and define their self worth according to the way others perceive them, say experts. Debbie Mandel, a stress-management author, calls it "stress addiction."

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"Women who are addicted to stress are suppressing feelings of unattractiveness, unworthiness and inadequacy," says Mandel. "[They're] always moving forward, living in the future or worrying what will happen later. It's a survival mechanism."

Deborah Roth Ledley, author of a stress-management book for new moms, suggests there's also a little of the martyr complex. "Women say, 'I'll be neglecting the kids,' or 'Things will fall apart at home if I'm not there,'" Roth Ledley says. "In fact, everyone will benefit if mom comes back from her break feeling more patient and energetic."

But no matter what the underlying psychological reasons, when a trying event occurs such as a [job loss](#), even the most balanced individual can end up becoming overwhelmed and losing a sense of who they are.

That's why it's important to regularly take time to pay attention to you.

Start with the simple stuff. Turn off your BlackBerry every night, even if just for 10 minutes. Screen all your mobile phone calls. Let your family know you'll be making some time for yourself this month. Gradually, you'll notice that the email response can wait; the call doesn't have to be returned immediately and your family likes the way you look and act after your alone time.

"Many women underrate themselves and their talents," says Dorothea Hover-Kramer, a therapist and author in Port Angeles, Washington. She notes that after the recent death of a client's wife, the widower spent \$100,000 just to replace the care and attention his wife gave their three children and home, excluding, of course, her love and support.

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