

# Dawn Kaffel Blog Archive: Stress and the Couple

Two news items caught my attention this week: how stress impacts relationships and whether there is a stress gender divide.

1. The first is new research released for National Stress Awareness Day on 1 November 201. It shows that many more women than men are feeling stressed and anxious.

Data showed that:

- more than half of women (54%) experiencing stress or anxiety are struggling to sleep – while less than 4 in 10 men do (39%)
- More than half eat junk food due to stress compared to a third of men
- Nearly half (45%) have taken out their stress on partners or family – in contrast to less than a third of men (31%)
- Almost a third (29%) have had panic attacks due to stress compared to less than one in five of men (31%)

Do women juggle with more caring and parenting responsibilities that need to be juggled with their careers?

2. The second is the BBC 2 programme *Trust me I'm a Doctor Mental Health Special* who were testing out some of the claims that can help to reduce stress, only some of which are supported by scientific evidence.

Working with couples it is becoming more evident how big a part stress can play between partners and how difficult it is to stay connected amid the difficulties. When conflicts arise it's much easier to blame our partners:-

- *'How could you have done that?'*
- *'Why didn't you empty the dishwasher?'*
- *'You never ask me about my day.'*

These are all everyday examples of annoyances, disappointments and criticisms that can easily lead to the blame game with our partners. It seems simpler to focus on these negative interactions than to consider how much stress may be a major contribution. Do we even realise how much stress can be the cause of our relationship distress?

Many couples continually juggle with busy work schedules and parenthood and run a hectic lifestyle. This can be difficult enough. Throw into the mix lack of sleep, financial worries, illness and family issues – it's not difficult to appreciate the constant presence of stress in our lives.

### **How does stress affect a relationship?**

When a stressed partner does not get the support they need from their partners, this often leads to feeling isolated and ignored in the relationship and the tendency is to withdraw or fight. If we confront our partner for not supporting us, they often feel misunderstood – not even realising their own behaviours.

Even if we aren't stressed ourselves, we are often not very responsive or miss the opportunity to provide comfort and help to our partners. We often don't want to admit to ourselves that everything and everyone is making you irritable.

If both partners are overwhelmed with stress at the same time, which often happens, the situation worsens. We use each other to vent and take it out on our partners by picking fights over little things and being overtly critical. This often becomes a competition for who is not cared about the most.

### **How to stay connected under stress**

Some partners chose to keep stress to themselves in order to protect a partner. Other partners chose to off-load at every opportunity making it difficult to find any relief. Neither way is ideal. Use this situation as an ideal opportunity to connect with your partner and really try to understand what they need in the way of support from you right now and how to give it. It may be as simple as practical hands-on assistance or it may include more physical comfort and emotional reassurance.

Learn to be more aware of just how much stress your partner may be experiencing. Don't just look at the negative behaviour but try and understand together what might be going on below the surface.

At times we presume our partners should know when we are stressed and get reactive when they don't respond in the way we want them to. Perhaps the answer to this is to ask for help when it is needed in a way that will get the response you need from your partner.

Take time out to support your partner's stress head on. Sitting down together, taking time out to listen, to offer comfort and understanding rather than focusing on yourself, these are not only key factors in managing stress but show our partners in those important moments that we are truly there for them side by side no matter what.

Stress doesn't need to threaten our connection to our partners, it can bring us closer together when our stress hormones activate our brain's systems. Instead we can respond with compassion, love and cooperation.

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or **(020) 8959 9528**. Alternatively you can contact me by email via my website.