the friendly way to beat stress

Why a girls’ night out is better than a good stiff drink

BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

W E’RE HERE in a cozy restaurant, the five of us, slurping fruity drinks and consoling Sara. She called earlier today to tell us the dream job she’d been working toward for months fell through. She sounded so miserable; we knew what we had to do. When one of us is stressed out, we fall into formation—“Let’s move!”—and head for an emergency girls’ night out.

And so we’re slurping, we’re telling Sara we believe in her, we’re offering suggestions about where to apply next, we’re saying that the idiot who didn’t hire her will surely be sorry someday.

Bleep bleep. Someone’s cell phone is ringing. It’s Nancy’s. “Oh, hi, Honey,” she says. “Yeah, we’re still here. No, we haven’t even had dessert yet. What? Well, we’re talking. What?

About stuff. Huh? Honey, we’re processing.”

All of us can recite, with little prompting, what her husband is saying. Because it is what any of our men would be saying: “What in the name of pasta primavera have you been talking about all this time?” Or, “Haven’t you already spent hours discussing Sara’s vocational vicissitudes on the phone?” And, “I don’t get it.”

Of course he doesn’t, the operative word here being he. Guys can’t possibly understand the restorative powers of a girls’ night out. But for many of us, it’s a surefire way to manage stress. It’s like meditation or yoga or a good stiff drink—only more social.

And now comes news that we may have science on our side. According to a team of UCLA researchers, women respond differently to stress than men do. That may not sound like a novel idea, but it is. For more than half a century now, “fight or flight” has been considered the principal way most animals, including humans, respond to stress. Either we become aggressive, we run away, or we withdraw.

That may be true for men, say the UCLA researchers. But it’s a whole different dance for women. According to their recent study, females of many species, including humans, respond to stressful situations by seeking social contact with others—especially other females—or nurturing their young. The researchers dubbed this behavior “tend and befriend.”

Never has girls’ night out received such respect. Indeed, if a hard day at the office makes you want to come home and bake cookies with the kids, well, you go girl. That may be nature’s way of calming you down.

Just where did this delightful idea originate? With a bit of gender consciousness on the part of a researcher who studies the biological effects of stress. Several years ago, Shelley Taylor, the UCLA study’s principal investigator, came to the startling realization that most stress research focused on men. Indeed, until 1995 (when the government mandated that agency-funded research grants include both men and women), just 17 percent of the people who participated in laboratory studies of stress were women. Animal studies were similarly focused on males.

“I was shocked,” says Taylor. “I didn’t know there were any really big mistakes left in science.”

The reason for the gender imbalance could be as old as the hills: Until recently most stress researchers were men. And men, after all, were thought to be the ones dropping dead from stress-related disorders such as cardiovascular disease. (We now know, of course, that heart disease is also the number one killer of women.)

Then there was the old menstrual cycle issue. How could women provide predictable data if their hormones and emotions were always in a state of flux?

Taylor suspected there was more to the story, so she and her team of five scientists gathered several hundred studies on animals and humans, zeroing in on the ones that included

Instead of engaging in “fight or flight,” women are more likely to “tend and befriend.”
Read Up on Feeling Down

In Women & Depression (Lowell House, $18), author M. Sara Rosenthal discusses some of the factors—from biology to society—that cause women to be twice as likely as men to suffer from the blues. Rosenthal also weighs in on body image issues and therapy options.

One Way to Get More Sex

More down south. In a recent poll of more than 1,000 adults from around the country, 48 percent of southerners said they were sexually active, and 10 percent—more than anywhere else in the nation—claimed to have sex at least once a day. So that’s what they mean by southern hospitality.

Growing Old Happily

What do fine wine and psychological health have in common? Both get better with age, or so it seems. California researchers who followed 236 people over five decades found that psychological well-being—defined by the ability to show compassion, have positive relationships with others, and be productive—kept improving as the participants aged.

WANTED: Socially Aware

If you’re into yoga and organic veggies, a singles bar probably isn’t the best place to seek out your soul mate. A better option is www.ConsciousSingles.com, a new online dating service for holistic types. Membership is $25 for two months—or a free one-month trial.

FRIENDLY WAY TO BEAT STRESS females. Sure enough, significant differences emerged.

They looked at rats. (Female rats housed together live 40 percent longer than those housed in isolation.) They looked at prairie voles. (Caged males calm down when paired with female companions.) They looked at the harem structure of gelada baboons. (Females spend much of their day grooming other females.) They looked at the typical human male coming home after a stressful day at the office; in a 1989 study he responded by wanting to be left alone or by taking it out on his wife or children. They looked at the typical human female coming home after a stressful day at the office; that same study found her more likely to cope with a bad day by focusing her attention on her children.

Finally, they also considered what’s known about the biological mechanisms involved in stress reactions. There, too, they noticed gender differences.

Males and females produce many of the same hormones in response to stress, but females secrete more oxytocin, a hormone that has been studied largely for its role in childbirth. In several animal species, oxytocin encourages maternal behaviors, such as comforting and nurturing. And in general, research shows that animals and people with high oxytocin levels tend to be calmer and more social. Men, too, produce oxytocin when they’re stressed, but testosterone, which also increases in anxious situations, mitigates its calming effect. In women, on the other hand, estrogen seems to enhance oxytocin’s action.

Many links in Taylor’s theory await scientific confirmation. But at the moment she’s “riding high,” she says, on the study’s implications. The tend-and-befriend response could, for example, explain why women are less likely than men to develop certain stress-related disorders such as hypertension and alcoholism. Given what we know about the therapeutic value of social support—study after study shows that people with lots of shoulders to lean on are generally healthier than lone wolves—women’s comfort-seeking tendency could even help explain why they live an average of seven and a half years
FRIENDLY WAY TO BEAT STRESS longer than men.

Not everyone is convinced by Taylor's hypothesis, however. In fact, noted stress expert Herbert Benson, president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute, scoffs at the idea that women don't exhibit a fight-or-flight response. "We all experience it. It's evolutionarily necessary." Still, he acknowledges that women may have different coping mechanisms than men do, a position that's not so far from Taylor's after all, once you strip away the semantics.

Robert Sapolsky, on the other hand, a Stanford University neuroscientist and the author of three books on the biology of stress, is definitely impressed. "My studies have always been on males," he admits. "Taylor's theme is solid and quite fascinating."

At the very least, the study's findings could be just the kind of validation some women need. Anyone, that is, who has ever grabbed for the telephone with an urgency every bit as real as that which drives the chocoholic. Or anyone who has had to endure those tiresome questions from a man who can't understand "what in the name of pasta primavera" there is left to talk about.

When it's my husband's turn to interrupt a girls' night out with that question, the answer is easy. "A lot." Because, while we are finally finished consoling Sara, we shift our attention to Beth, who needs some relief from dealing with her mother's ailing health.

In fact, it's nearly midnight by the time we are talked out. Well, all of us except Wendy, who has been nearly silent all evening. She's been sitting here looking so tired, so forlorn, so positively sick of something in her life that she hasn't even had the energy to talk about it. And yet she's the one who stands up and says, "I can't tell you how helpful this evening has been. God, I feel like a new woman."

We don't even have to ask her why. We know implicitly—whether it's some action of our hormones or something mysterious we share with female rats, prairie voles, and geleda baboons—that stress has a way of dissipating when women surround themselves with women.