

Cool it Lady, Go Tend and Befriend

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Theories are useful when they support us being the best we can be. A relatively new and exciting theory of stress response for women was reported by Professor Shelley E. Taylor and her team at UCLA. In 1998 they began to wonder if women had different reactions to stress than males. By 2000 they reported a phenomenon they called ***Tend and Befriend***.

The classic *fight-or-flight* term for stress response was coined in 1932 by the scientist and physician, Walter Cannon, in which the release of adrenaline into the body is described. Feelings of danger or threat are triggered by a grizzly bear, an angry boss, a young child running into traffic or distressing self talk. In response, the body's nerve ends tighten, heart rate increases and breathing becomes quick and shallow. A sense of wanting to defend or retreat occurs. Up until 1995 only 17% of the research on *fight-or-flight* response was done with females.

But that changed with Taylor and her team's insights. One study they cite is by Rena Repetti who directed children to record observations of their parents on stressful days. Children made comments such as "Dad's in a bad mood. Stay out of his way." Read *fight-or-flight*. On the other hand during days filled with strain and pain, mothers were often described as more frequently hugging and expressing love. Female dogs, monkeys and rats were reported to run to their offspring when sensing danger. Do males run to protect their offspring and others in time of danger? Of course they do, but females are more inclined to flutter, some might say *smother* their dependants, their partners and even their guests when feeling distress. Just visit a local tot lot and see hovering mothers cautioning their children about the dangers of the swing while dads are on the highest rung of the climber with their pre-schooler. Meanwhile at the local doggie park we can observe women giving focused care to their darling Taffy while men tend to engage in adventurous play with their Mannie.

Women are also inclined to tend in their marriages. Have you noticed how Aunt Gladys ruminates on Uncle George's needs? A hormone called oxytocin may be involved in this response. Oxytocin is released during labour, nursing and tending, and has a relaxing effect. This is the *tend* part of the formula.

The *befriend* piece of the research was derived partly from studies in anthropology. Since the cave years, females have grouped together around the fire to share caregiving, to prepare food and to protect one another. Our

pioneer ancestors were still gathering to make quilts or peel enough potatoes to feed the wheat thrashers; contributing to family survival in the new world. Now here's the exciting conclusion and good news: Women, whether mostly at home or in the world of employment, need to get together. They need each other to share their herstories, to "aah" in empathy, to access assistance with domestic and work demands, to sift through emotions and thoughts, and to nurture in the form of hugs and encouragement. All this supportive give and take helps relieve women's everyday stress. So ladies, unite! Phone your friends! Go for lunch!

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