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NO. 1 IN THE USA

AFTER 60, STRESS EASES – EVEN FOR WOMEN

By Marilyn Elias, USA Today
August 22, 2002

CHICAGO – Women feel more stressed than men at every age, but both sexes enjoy a sharp drop in daily hassles after they're 60, shows a large study due Friday.

Employed men and women have comparable work stress. What's driving the gender difference is that men are far less likely than women to feel emotional strain from problems of relatives and friends, says University of Arizona psychologist David Almeida.

"Women's roles have changed, men's haven't," Almeida says. He'll report at the American Psychological Association meeting here.

Almeida's new findings are part of a national research project on adult well-being supported by the MacArthur Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health. Researchers phoned 1,031 Americans eight nights in a row, asking about what caused them stress, their mood and physical symptoms.

From kids faltering at school to in-laws needing a hand or friends' marriages collapsing, "women's hassles revolve around other people, men's do not," Almeida says. Men's problems center on the job. They're more stressed out than women by "technical breakdowns" such as with computers and mistakes on the job, although the sexes are equally likely to feel overload at work.

Women's need to cram too much into each day may be stoking the stress. Other new research shows women have 30 minutes less free time a day than men, compared with no leisure gap between the sexes in 1965 and 1975. Parents, particularly mothers, have the least free time,

says University of Pennsylvania sociologist Liana Sayer, who did the time study.

Society wouldn't be better off if women lowered their stress levels by imitating men, says psychologist Abigail Stewart, an associate dean at the University of Michigan. She's now directing a National Science Foundation project on how women in science are faring. "Women are doing a lot of invisible work that's essential to human existence," says Stewart, who had just taken her elderly mother to get hearing aids.

"We think of stress as only negative, but it reflects active, challenged lives. ... It's just that men need to do more relating to people and sharing the load."

In Almeida's study:

At ages 25 to 59, women reported stress on 44% of days versus 39% for men.

From 60 to 74, women had stress on 32% of days, men 25%.

Adults younger than 40 were most likely to feel strain from arguments and interpersonal tensions.

Mid-lifers had the most tension about money — not the lack of it, but concerns over how to use what they have.

The older adults were, the better they coped with stress, not allowing it to sour mood or provoke physical symptoms.