



## **Friends DO Make a Difference...**

by Patti Hathaway, Business Advisor & Author

**Description:** Did you know that not having close friends can be as detrimental to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight? This article explores why friends are critically important to our mental and physical health and how they can help us deal with the stress of life.

### ***Entire Article:***

The Journal of the American Medical Association in 1997 reported that a lack of diverse social contacts was a stronger risk factor for colds than smoking, low vitamin C intake, or elevated stress hormones. The Carnegie Mellon University researchers who conducted the study say that interacting with a wide range of people likely tempers our physical response to stressful situations. They suspect that social support may somehow boost immune function.

I was doing a keynote on "Gender Fender Benders" and mentioned a study about how women deal with stress as compared to men - 90% of the stress research for the last 5 decades was conducted on men, not women. A recent landmark UCLA study suggests that women respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals that cause them to make and maintain friendships with other women.

"Until this study was published, scientists generally believed that when people experience stress, they trigger a hormonal cascade that revs the body to either stand and fight or flee as fast as possible," explains Laura Cousino Klein, PhD, now an assistant professor of biobehavioral health at Pennsylvania State University in State College and one of the study's authors. It's an ancient survival mechanism left over from the time we were chased across the planet by saber-toothed tigers. Now the researchers suspect that women have a larger behavioral repertoire than just "fight or flight."

In fact, says Dr. Klein, it seems that when the hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress response in a woman, it buffers the fight or flight response and encourages her to tend children and gather with other women instead. When she actually engages in this tending or befriending, studies suggest that more oxytocin is released, which further counters stress and produces a calming effect. This calming response does not occur in men, says Dr. Klein, because testosterone--which men produce in high levels when they're under stress--seems to reduce the effects of oxytocin.

The fact that women respond to stress differently than men has significant implications for our health. It may take some time for new studies to reveal all the ways that oxytocin encourages us to care for children and hang out with other women, but the "tend and befriend" notion

developed by Drs. Klein and Taylor may explain why women consistently outlive men. Study after study has found that social ties reduce our risk of disease by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. "There's no doubt, this is helping us live longer."

In one study, for example, researchers found that people who had no friends increased their risk of death over a 6-month period. In another study, those who had the most friends over a 9-year period cut their risk of death by more than 60%. Friends are also helping us live better. The famed Nurses' Health Study from Harvard Medical School found that the more friends women had, the less likely they were to develop physical impairments as they aged, and the more likely they were to be leading a joyful life.

In fact, the results were so significant, the researchers included, that not having close friend or confidante was as detrimental to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight!

"Every time we get overly busy with work and family, the first thing we do is let go of friendships with other women," explains Dr. Josselson. "We push them right to the back burner. That's really a mistake, because women are such a source of strength to each other. We nurture one another. And we need to have unpressured space in which we can do the special kind of talk that women do when they're with other women. It's a very healing experience."

Social isolation -- having no one to confide in -- is a serious source of stress for many. We have become so busy, we haven't made the time to develop friendships with others. That is why some find it incredibly stressful to consider retirement. We haven't developed any friendships or hobbies that will give us something to do with our extra time. We need to begin preparing for retirement far before we actually retire.

We are created as human beings, not human doings, human havings, or human goings. Yet, much of our worldly success is defined by what we "do" or "have." In the end, we will all die and leave all we have on this earth. What are you doing today to invest in the important relationships in your life? Although I have written several books and spoken to thousands of people across the country, I know that the greatest measure of my success will be how Jim and I have raised our two sons, not the "things" I have accomplished. This is difficult to keep in mind while on the treadmill of success.

*Patti Hathaway, CSP, The CHANGE AGENT, is one of fewer than 7% women worldwide to have earned the Certified Speaking Professional designation from the National Speakers Association for her proven presentation skills. She is a Business Advisor and the author of 6 books that have been translated into 5 languages and have sold over 100,000 copies. Patti solves your people challenges by providing highly customized solutions to meet your needs. Contact Patti at 1-800-339-0973 or at her web site: [www.thechangeagent.com](http://www.thechangeagent.com) for information on her speaking and consulting services or to receive her free e-mail newsletter/blog.*

