

SCENE

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Lonne L. Sterling
LMHC, CEAP

Lonne Sterling and Christine Michaels, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAP) have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance abuse fields for over 25 years. They are in private practice in Sarasota and have founded the Center for Change of Florida, providing clients with outpatient counseling and area businesses with employee assistance services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bring unique and varied experiences to the partnership. Lonne was Director of an Employee Assistance Program and Outpatient Program for one of the area's largest Mental Health Corporations, and successfully managed EAP and Managed Care product lines for 19 major firms and 20 national affiliates. As a Certified Relapse Prevention Specialist, Christine has extensive experience working in addictions with particular expertise in substance abuse assessment, early intervention and prevention. Clinically, both Lonne and Christine are highly skilled in utilizing a brief, solution-focused, therapeutic approach.



Christine Michaels
LMHC, CEAP

For further information or assistance call the Center for Change of Florida at (941) 955-5518.

I AM WOMAN; I AM STRESSED!

by Christine Michaels and Lonne Sterling

One of the most common complaints we hear from our female clients is "I'm so overwhelmed. What can I do to eliminate stress from my life?"
Unfortunately, nothing.

Stress is an inevitable component of being alive and the natural response of the body to the demands made upon it. The problem lies with the way in which we handle the demands we place on ourselves. If we operate at our optimal level of stress, then we feel energized, creative and productive. This we call "good" stress. However, when we go beyond optimum effectiveness, we are experiencing "bad" stress and our physical and emotional health becomes compromised. If we continue to plow ahead with no adjustment to our behavior, the result will be **disease** in all areas of our life.

Stress is our biological early warning device detecting danger. When stressed, a series of protective changes occur in the body to deal with perceived threats. Unfortunately, our bodies cannot distinguish between real and imaginary danger. Primitive man needed quick bursts of energy to "fight or flee" predators; a natural restorative process would then occur in the body within three minutes after the threat disappeared. However, in today's modern, fast-paced, technologically complicated world, most of our stressors are unrelenting. When stress becomes **chronic and persistent**, the body loses its' natural ability to downshift into a state of relaxation (or what is called "homeostasis") and illness may ensue.

While stress is not considered an illness, it is the number one reason why people seek medical and/or psychological help. According to the American Psychological Association, 43% of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress and 75%-90% of all physician office visits have stress-related components. We are all generally familiar with the physical, emotional, behavioral and psychological ramifications of chronic stress.

What we are probably not as aware of is the **particular effects of stress on women**. Sex hormones modulate the stress response. Females under stress secrete more of these trigger chemicals than males do under the same conditions. Surprisingly, it is believed that a woman's capacity for tolerating stress may even be greater than a man's. What is different, however, is that women experience what is called "**Multiple Role Stress**".

Women's multiple roles (such as child and elder care concerns, family schedules, career demands, educational needs, financial issues and relationships) and greater responsibilities increase their opportunities for stress. Women's stressors are more constant and continuous. They

become more worn out from their stress and it becomes visible sooner.

Unfortunately, women's roles too often conflict and they are forced to make tough choices between competing demands. They tend to overextend themselves in their attempts to do it all and, when unsuccessful, often suffer disappointment, guilt and a sense of powerlessness. This is one reason physicians and therapists see more women than men for depression and anxiety disorders.

Sadly, to manage our stress, we all too often fall back on negative coping mechanisms. There are **so many**, but to name just a few: abuse of alcohol and other drugs, over-eating, over-spending, over-reacting (violence), over-sleeping, excessive negativity, blaming others and basically denying anything is wrong.

Although we cannot eliminate our stress entirely, we *can* implement effective strategies to live healthier and happier lives. Here are some of our "**top picks**" for positively coping with the stresses in your life: Look at time as your life ▪ Allow yourself regular leisure time ▪ Set goals for yourself ▪ Don't combine too many activities ▪ Re-order daily priorities ▪ Write things down, don't rely on memory ▪ Ask for help ▪ Delegate chores ▪ Learn to say NO and I DON'T KNOW ▪ Pamper yourself ▪ Get your optimum amount of sleep nightly ▪ Practice positive self-talk and thinking ▪ Know your stress triggers and personal limits ▪ Accept what you can and cannot control ▪ Breathe deeply and implement daily relaxation exercises ▪ Eat nutritionally ▪ Get regular physical exercise ▪ Try yoga, t'ai chi or a support group ▪ Rehearse for stressful events ▪ Let yourself laugh and cry ▪ Talk less and listen more ▪ Love more and worry less ▪ Develop an attitude of gratitude ▪ Remember you always have choices ▪ **Focus on the NOW.**

If, after all your own best efforts you still feel overwhelmed, we suggest you consult your physician and/or seek professional mental health counseling as you may be experiencing symptoms of serious psychological disorders, such as depression or anxiety. If that is the case, it may require more extensive treatment that could involve one or a combination of medication, biofeedback, cognitive behavioral techniques, hypnosis, EMDR or massage therapy.

We end with some "**food for thought**".

Stress is a part of life not a way of life. Fill your life with stress and there's little room for dreams. If you don't live in the moment, where do you propose to live? Let go of what is beyond your control and it will no longer control you. Stop, Look, Listen... Breathe.