

'Taking It Like A Man' Real Men Don't Get Sick Or Do They?



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The words "Stress" and "Men" don't seem to go together, or that's what Irish men seem to think. The belief out there is that if a man admits he's stressed then it is a sign of weakness. Isn't the essence of maleness to push the limits, to tough it out, or as the saying goes "Take it like a man?" If one chooses to buy into these beliefs, beliefs driven by the assumptions that real men don't go to the doctor, real men don't need a break, real men don't get stressed, then the pushing yourself crosses a boundary. At the extremes, it stops being machoism and becomes an exercise in machoism (taking a weird pleasure in damaging oneself by being too macho). The outcome in living this over-blown belief is that men have normalised the signs and symptoms of stress and ill health and packaged it as the signs and symptoms of success and achievement.

The question one has to ask is, if pushing yourself beyond the limit results in ill-health, then surely there is an easier healthier and happier way of achieving success - doing it the smart way rather than the hard way?

What is the reality of the situation?

Men are realizing that they need to get a handle on the symptoms of the stress that is playing havoc with their lives. It has been stated that an individual suffering from stress has a lower quality of life than the terminally ill (People Management, 2006), a fact that cannot be ignored. As one senior manager explained to me, 'Try functioning effectively on four hours sleep a night - and that if I'm lucky'. Doctors are prescribing medication as a short term option to alleviate the signs and symptoms of stress but this only alleviates the symptoms of stress and it definitely does not resolve the situation.

What research and professional experience in working with men who have burnt out has proven is that those who suffer from stress are more accident-prone, take less care of their diet, either over- or under- exercise and resort to negative social behavior, smoking and alcohol as their preferred way to relax. This only ensures that the damage to the health of these sufferers is compounded.

What additional pressures?

There has always been pressure on both men and women but economic prosperity has come with its own challenges.

Our expectations have gone up. The Irish dream is now to live the American dream, which even the Americans realised, comes with a price. We work longer hours than the average European; we are carrying more personal debt than five years ago, up by 135%. A recent Irish Examiner article stated that 'Irish families and consumers are drowning in a sea of mortgage and credit card debt'. The outcome is being seen in many workplaces with increased absenteeism, increased visits to the G.P, increase in mental health illnesses. Even doctors and pharmacists will admit they are prescribing more medication for stress related illness than before. The truth is that stress is no longer something a real man can ignore.

So what happens to the man who believes that 'Real men don't get sick'? Well, too often, the answer is that they get sick before they realise that they have to start managing stress and that living a day fueled by nervous energy will only undermine one's performance both in work at home.



How do men deal with stress?

When a man gets stressed the flight and fight response is triggered. The flight response is played out when a man seeks 'escape activity' to remove them from the stressors which enables them to relax. An example of a flight activity may be sports such as golfing where he gets to work off the excess cortisol/adrenaline in a challenging way.

The fight response comes into affect when he cannot get away from the stressors and start to react to situations in a aggressive way.

Both flight and fight response can lead to negative outcomes - the pub becomes the flight response, lashing out becomes the fight response. This behavior then escalates - the arguments become a daily occurrence, the trips to the pub become daily, one drink becomes a few and over time he is unable to become effective in his work and life.

What is important to know about mans relationship with stress and performance is that stress undermines performance and as male self-

esteem is often built around adequacy of performance, then when one is unable to perform in work or in life he may become demotivated, withdrawing into himself or resorting to overcompetitive behavior risking his relationships, career, health just to win. This is why exercise alone cannot remedy the effects of stress and why a holistic approach needs to be taken to support your client in making the appropriate life changes.



What happens in the body when men are stressed?

When men and women are under pressure our bodies produce cortisol, and this hormone in small doses boosts alertness and memory. However when one is stressed the body produces excessive, constant amounts which results in a blood sugar imbalance with the knock on effects of fatigue, decrease levels of muscle mass and an increase in fat storage, and long term elevate levels of cortisol undermines the immune system which is why people who are stressed tend to suffer from ill health.

The hormonal differences between men and women affect how each react to stress. In stressful situations women's and men's bodies release cortisol and epinephrine into the bloodstream. However, the difference is that women secrete larger amounts of oxytocin which counter the production of cortisol and epinephrine, promoting nurturing and relaxing emotions. Men secrete smaller amounts of oxytocin, which means that they are left feeling more agitated when under stress. Add in men's much higher background levels of testosterone, the hormone that makes you more aggressive and more competitive, and a stressed man is either going to be better than every other man, on his own, or, quite literally, die trying.

What are signs and symptoms of stress which men present with?

- Flushed face prior to commencing his session
- Irritable
- Constant need to stay busy
- Short fuse, snappy
- Less inclined to chat - withdrawn into himself
- Increase in alcohol intake
- Sleeplessness
- Fatigue
- Loss of interest in coming to his session/gym
- Little joy - loss of interest in doing things
- Increase in appetite - junk, sugary, salt foods
- Headaches
- Decreased immunity - ear & throat infections
- Heart burn
- Reduced work performance
- Erectile dysfunction

As Exercise & Health Fitness Professionals how can you approach/deal with a client who is stressed?

- *Appreciate that stress is a serious health risk. Stress-related illnesses range from depression, hair loss, ulcers, burnout, cardiovascular diseases, strokes, heart attacks, diabetes just to name a few. From my experience, people often don't realise that they are suffering from stress or they are unaware where to go to learn how to manage it. You may be your client's first port of call and although it is not your role to support your client in this way, it is your role to educate them and flag the health risks.*
- *It is without question that a good workout in the gym does help burn off the excessive amounts of adrenaline which has been building up in their system over the day; however, this approach does produce more testosterone which can make a client feeling more stressed. You may need to encourage your clients take a break from the seven day a week gym fix and refer them to a stress-management professional to learn alternative ways to managing the stress hormones' effects on their bodies.*
- *When you have been living on a constant adrenaline rush released when under stress it can be hard to start slowing down from what they feel is normal and part of their identity as a person. This means that getting the balance back both physiologically and mentally can be challenging and can take some time to allow for readjustment. That is why we need to appreciate that being told you're stressed and learning ways to manage it cannot be treated with a one-size-fits-all approach.*

What physical activity regime should I put my client on?

- *It's important to get the client to burn off the excessive adrenaline, through high intensity workouts; however, this needs to be followed by a lighter slower exercise, for example getting the client to do a lighter weight session where the focus is on technique, form and lengthened reps.*
- *With regard to cardiovascular workouts, you should get your client to focus on constant pace training, rather than high-intensity interval training. Encourage them to give the body time to rest and repair itself, and stress how crucial this is to a successful fitness regime. Point out that over-training won't give them better results, and that to get any results, they need to train properly and rest properly.*
- *Exercise classes like Pilates may be worth recommending. The emphasis on control, precision and getting it just right rather than being the guy who can bench most in the gym will give them a sense of control, of the importance of doing it right rather than over-doing it, and will certainly give your clients a sense of achievement - as well as good health & fitness results.*

How do I need to approach a demotivated stressed client?

When such a client comes to you, they need encouragement to get them back on track. Living a life of stress can undermine a man's confidence in his ability to perform and this affects his self-confidence. So one needs to be mindful of this and realise that highlighting what they've been doing wrong is not going to motivate them. Start by developing an achievable short term exercise plan, where the exercise goal is possible for them to commit to. For example, a twenty minute session a week of light running and a light weights programme is what we are talking about. In achieving this, your client will start committing to a medium term plan.

Your need to appreciate that during times like this our stressed client may need us to cut them some slack and to acknowledge their achievements, however small. As the saying goes success commences by taking many small steps.

Would he benefit from taking it easy in the gym?

What Exercise and Health/Fitness professionals need to take into consideration is that this person is probably already pushing themselves to excess, and is unaware of this. Maintaining an active lifestyle is important; however we need to drop the intensity.

When someone is under stress they will often be pushing themselves physically, mentally, psychologically and emotionally, and may feel that they are not achieving. In such cases, your client needs your help to realise that if they go into the gym cold, and try to bench-press more than anyone else there, most likely all they'll do is end up with a sore, and still flat, chest – and a dent the shape of the bar across their forehead. Plus they won't darken the doors of the gym for a fortnight, because they won't be able to move. The competitive instinct needs to be focused into having the perfect technique, into control, into an exercise plan where it acts to motivate them without burning them out.

It is important that you insure that your client is feeling that they are getting something from your sessions however they also need to appreciate it's not about being the best in their gym, it's about doing what's best for them.



Do Men need to talk about their feelings?

There is a myth that men do not need to talk about their feelings, preferring to ignore them. The research study conducted by the Australian Catholic University (ACU National) academic Dr Robert Compton in partnership with consulting firm Davidson TrahaireCorpsych last year identified that this male belief is just a myth and that men do need to start managing their emotions.

The data sample was taken from 725,000 employees across 389 Australian workplaces, using data from 31,000 new counselling referrals between January 2006 and June 2007. The research, conducted, reveals that 34 per cent of all employees who seek counselling in the workplace are male. It demonstrates that men are willing to accept professional help for their problems - or even seek it out themselves - if it is made available. The study also identified that men in the work-place who are caught up in the 'mortgage trap' and working longer hours to stay afloat, yet trying to strike a balance between family and work commitments, are more inclined to seek out professional help. The study also identified that these issues do affect a man's work performance. So the belief that ignoring something will help relieve the situation is unfounded. As apart of a exercise routine, if you feel your client is experiencing long term stress I would recommend that you refer them to their doctor and a stress-management professional.

Who can you refer him to?

If your client is experiencing the symptoms of stress such as: faintness, dizziness, red faced, constant headaches, sleepless nights, digestive upset, forgetfulness, pains and aches in the body. I would recommend that your firstly refer them to their G.P. It's not uncommon for one's blood pressure to be elevated during stressful periods. Once their G.P has done a full check up on them, then I would recommend that you suggest to your client, to consult a stress management professional who can work with them. The International Stress Management Association are the main professional body who ensures that professional working in this field are competent. They are the body who organise National 'Stress Awareness Day' which will be falling this year on the 5th of November 2008. You can refer your clients to this website www.isma.org.uk or to www.renewalconsultants.com for further information on stress management practitioners and services in their area.

Summary:

Stress related illness affects men and women. When focussing on your male client, ensure that the physical activity /exercise regime that you have developed for him is alleviating the effects of stress on his health rather than exacerbating the situation. Plan wisely, Teach effectively, Evaluate consistently.

