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[Home](#) > Gender, Culture and Stress Response

Gender, Culture and Stress Response

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Differences in gender and culture are found to have significant influences in how humans respond to stressors and stressful situations. These differences require a deeper understanding in order for a person to learn how he responds to stress, and whether his stress response is still healthy or not.

Personality and life experiences are truly affecting the way we respond to stress, but do you know that other factors like gender and culture can contribute to our different responses to stressors?

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Gender and Stress

The ways in which stress is physically and psychologically experienced may vary because of sex difference, according to psychologists who focused their study on the relationship between gender and stress response. In 1972, Johansson & Post conducted a study which involved equal number of male and female participants. They were subjected to a particular non-stressful situation, and were then transferred to a stressful circumstance.

The results of the study showed that both male and female participants showed an increased in adrenaline levels, yet the adrenaline levels of men was much higher as compare to women. Because of this, the physiological stress response of women was lower compare to men.

Johansson & Post concluded that the results might be because of three reasons.

- Men and women differ biologically in terms of hormones.
- Men are typically more aggressive in physical terms than women. This was supported by Hastrup, et.al. in 1980, proving that hormonal levels truly affect stress response in women throughout their menstrual cycle.
- Men and women differ in traditional gender roles, such as women are typically more gentle and caring than men. However, this assumption might have been changed over the years because women are now assuming traditionally male roles.

Culture and Stress

Learning about cultural differences also plays a vital role in understanding how each person responds to stress.

It's widely known that more black Americans suffer from coronary heart diseases than white Americans. This triggered the study of Cooper, et.al in 1999 to learn the reason behind this trend.

Together with his research team, Cooper found out that there was an unintentional genetic selection during the transfer of black Americans to the New World via slave ships. The ancestors of the black Americans today most probably survived the diarrhea outbreak during that time, which means they had a better ability to retain water which contributed to the development of CHD.

Looking at today's situation, we could see that the higher unemployment and literacy rates of black Americans as compared to that of white Americans, might have created a poverty-related stress, leading them to suffer from the consequences of negative stress response such as CHD and other diseases.

In 1983, Weg initiated a study on the cultural difference between a Georgian Tribe and other cultures like the United Kingdom. He found out that the members of the Georgian tribe had a much longer life expectancy than people living in UK.

Weg concluded that there were many factors that might have contributed to the great difference between the two cultures' life expectancy rates. These include the stress-free lifestyle, fresh meat and vegetable diet, a greater social support system, higher levels of physical activity and lack of vices such as cigarette and alcohol in the Georgian Tribe. It is to be studied yet whether the genes of people living in different cultures affect the stress response tendencies.

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