



Bring Your Body to Work
By Dr. Nancy Post

Women Who Do Too Much

Can following the leader ruin your health?

Let's look at the life of female leaders and find out.

A recent study of high achieving women explored the private and professional lives of highly educated, high earning women. The Center for Work-Life Policy in New York targeted the top 10% of women in the workplace (measured in terms of earning power) to learn what motivated them, how they lived and what they felt about work. The survey queried two age groups of American and British women: 41-55 year olds; and their younger peers aged 28-40. The women were asked about their home lives: relations with spouses, children, delegation of home responsibilities and feelings about "balance." Additionally, the employment histories and current feelings about work were evaluated.*

So, who gets to the top, and how does she feel about her life?

First of all, she works longer hours. Findings showed that the more successful the woman, the longer she works. Of the "ultra-achievers" (who earn more than \$100,000 per year), more than 34% work more than 50 hours per week compared to 29% of high achievers (who earn between \$55,000 and \$65,000.)

Secondly, the more successful she is, the more likely she is to be single. Only 60% of high achieving women in the 41-55 year old bracket are married or with partners. It's worse in corporate jobs, where the number falls to 57%. (By contrast, the study shows that 83% of ultra achieving men are married.)

Thirdly, she is more likely NOT to have children than she used to be. Thirty three percent of high achieving women are childless among women age 41-55 and this number rises significantly to 42% in corporate America. Compare this to only 19% of ultra achieving men without children. Further, of the women who didn't have children, only 14% did this by choice—more than a quarter of the 41-55 year old childless women still wished for children.

Women in the workforce carefully observe the behavior of their more senior level colleagues to learn what it takes to 'succeed'. So, if you are a woman and you follow the example of female leaders, you'll work more, feel more torn between work and home, and be more likely to live alone during middle age. Additionally, if you work in a corporate setting, the pressures will be greater, though the compensation will be higher. Your home may be empty, but your bank account will be full.

It is not at all surprising that very few high achieving women feel fulfilled. The survey showed that, despite their success, only 16% feel that they can "have it all" in terms of family and career.

Although they may appear to be holding it all together, female leaders with families often feel compromised by the constant trade-offs and persistent juggling of the demands place upon them. This is even harder for women of color. Only 29% of high achieving African American women are married and almost half remain childless. In some cases, it is just too hard to do both.

The study suggested that women who work for themselves do a better job balancing than women who work in corporate America. In fact, self-employed women are less likely to be childless (22 percent versus 42 percent in the 41-55 year old age group), and self-employed women are more likely to be married (67 versus 57%)

The truths emanating from this study put a spot light on something many women know: taking a leadership role in an organization is likely to compromise your emotional health. As we know in the world of body/mind medicine, it is virtually impossible for emotional strain NOT to impact the body, especially for women, whose emotional changes immediately effect the delicate female endocrine system. Corporate cultures can effect your health, not just your choice of career.

I have worked with many professional women in leadership positions. Some have children, some are childless, some married or with a partner, some single. Yet they have a lot in common: they tend to be capable of extreme focus when they need to be, can get a lot done, and turn time management into a marshal art. The single ones routinely stay late at work and offer a level of time and devotion to their organizations that precludes time for much of a social life. Childless leaders with partners are comfortable spending a significant time independent of their mates. The ones with children have the hardest time, are often the most tired, and refer to time at home as a “second shift” when they assume the role of family chef as well as primary care giver for children (and elder parents.)

Two jobs for one woman opposes the study’s primary recommendations: that there should be constructive ways for senior level jobs to be shared and that meaningful part time assignments should be developed for talented, senior level women. American and British corporate cultures have begun to dip their toes in these waters, but practices such as job sharing are not yet common.

The sorry effect of this phenomenon shows up in our offices. Perfectly “healthy,” high functioning women in their 30’s arrive as they struggle with infertility. Successful, mature women cannot break the cycle of fatigue that arrived with menopause. Pressured women (of both age groups) struggle with memory problems, insomnia, and personal organization demonstrating the special connection in Chinese medicine between the uterus and the brain.

Ironically, the pressure to use all your time efficiently can lead to impairment in organizational ability. The very energy needed to focus gets depleted.

Women fought for the right to work, but many workplaces have barely changed to accommodate their needs. If mothering is an essential glue to a healthy society, then employment patterns must change so that children of working women grow up with functional mothers. The question is who needs treatment? Overstressed, successful women, or organizations who haven’t yet learned how to value them?

*The Hidden Brain Drain Task Force: Women and Minorities as Unrealized Assets, Center for Work-Life Policy, 2002