

## Articles

### "Cupcakes, Laundry and Tyra Banks - Relieve Stress by Stepping Away From the World"

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Let's say your 8-year-old son, Grant, is having his second-grade class party next Tuesday and you've been assigned to bring the cupcakes. You learn about this the previous Thursday. What do you do?

If you're a man, you probably don't give this a second thought until Tuesday morning, when you stop at the grocery store on the way to school (who cares if you're 10 minutes late?), pick up a couple boxes of bakery cupcakes, drop them off with the teacher and go about your day.

If you're a woman, you start fretting on Thursday, debating whether to do store-bought or homemade, what kind you're going to make, whether to use a mix or go from scratch, when you're going to get all the stuff (since God knows you're not going to have the time or the energy to go to the grocery store after work on Monday), when you're going to make them (as if your evenings aren't hectic enough), and how you're going to transport them.

Thursday comes, and you take in the cupcakes, beaming with pride at your own competence, organization and coping skills. You're exhausted and didn't have time to do your eye makeup before you left the house (because, as it turns out, the box you had planned to put the cupcakes in wasn't big enough, so you had to find another one), but you accomplished your mission, and you can hold your head up high around the other parents.

And that's the short version. We're not even considering, for example, the possibility of whether one of your son's classmates has food allergies (almost a given), or how you should decorate said cupcakes to appeal to both genders.

This is just one of the many, many scenarios that illustrate why women are more stressed out than men. Never is this more apparent than when we attempt to juggle our competing lives, that of home and work.

As Gloria Steinem is fond of saying: "I've yet to be on a campus where most women weren't worrying about some aspect of combining marriage, children and a career. I've yet to find one where many men were worrying about the same thing."

Granted, I don't personally know any men who fret about how they're going to pick up their kids from school and still meet their clients for drinks, but I assumed at least a couple men out there felt stressed by the juggling act.

Shows how little I know.

I used to think that we were just wusses, and that our stress was mostly self-imposed (after all, Grant's classmates probably would have enjoyed the store-bought cupcakes as much as, if not more than, the homemade ones). A growing body of research, however, is proving that women and men are simply hard-wired to deal with stress differently, and that we actually *feel* more stressed than men.

Some of the reasons include multitasking (even though women make up half the work force, we're still expected to carry the burden of most housework, as well as be ideal spouses and caretakers of our aging parents); physical vulnerability (women face physical threats that men don't); and cultural pressure (we're all expected to have Martha Stewart's home, Tyra Banks' body and Joanne Woodward's marriage).

Experts say there is more interconnection between both hemispheres of a woman's brain, meaning that women use more of their senses more of the time (sensual multitasking, if you will). Men tend to be more focused, filtering out needless background noise (i.e., anything outside the confines of a Dallas Cowboys game).

Speaking as one of the multitaskers, I can assure you it's exhausting. And, yes, stressful.

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### Some Relief

So, what do we do about it? On the one hand, women could admit defeat and quit their jobs. The problem there is that the world waiting for women at home is just as stressful as the one at the office, if not more so. That, and the money's better out here (those pesky mortgages insist on being paid, don't they?).

There are, of course, umpteen "stress relief" gadgets, creams, lotions and sprays out there. While I'm sure an aroma-therapy bath here and there isn't going to hurt anybody, I don't think any of that works for long.

It seems the single best way to combat stress is to take care of ourselves. Go the gym regularly, eat right, get enough rest and, generally, quit burning the candle at both ends. Bit of a Catch-22, isn't it? After all, while we're at the gym or going to bed early, the work – and the laundry – still piles up, and the stress cycle accelerates.

It's a funny thing, though: a well-rested, in-shape, well-nourished person handles stress better and has more energy than a sleep-deprived couch potato who lives on chips. Not only that, but she's more resistant to illness and chronic diseases.

So while it seems paradoxical that the best way to deal with the world is to step away from it, it works. It simply takes some compromises to arrange it. More help around the house (either paid or spousal), less time with the kids while you go to the gym and (if possible) reduced work hours.

Fortunately, although firms aren't at the forefront of alternative work arrangements, they are becoming increasingly accepting of them as part of the employment landscape. I wouldn't expect the law to become a cush job any time soon, but there is growing evidence (just check out magazines for articles about it and the media for news reports) that it's becoming more accommodating to the needs of working parents.

The world isn't going to let up on us anytime soon, so we better get used to it and find ways of coping with it.

And, for the record, I probably would have done the store-bought cupcakes. But I would have felt really guilty about it.