



BROKEN HEARTS

Stress & Menopause - Risk Factors for Heart Disease
Among Executive Women age 45-55 in 2017

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"Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

-The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde

Many high-power executive women between the ages of 45-55 located in the greater New York area are continuing to put their health and well-being at risk in 2017. While continuing to compete in a fast-paced, technologically driven and challenging economy, these women often endure long hours and horrendous commutes while trying to handle stressful positions common at the executive level. This, combined with balancing the demands of wife, mother, and caregiver in what has commonly come to be known as the "sandwich generation," morphed to include baby boomers, often results in these women neglecting their health and prioritizing their own needs last.

I believe the expectation and push by society, employers, and the women themselves to be "superwomen" has added enormous amounts of stress to their daily lives which can contribute to heart disease and even attacks. The long and short term effects of chronic stress and the poor health habits associated with this type of behavior not only puts them at risk of heart disease but ultimately is detrimental to their careers and their families. The desire to be "superwoman" ultimately leaves them to be less effective across the board.

What also compounds the health challenges for this age group of women are the normal struggles associated with the onset of menopause. "Heart disease is the top killer of women, and a woman's risk for heart disease increases dramatically around the time she goes through menopause — typically between ages 50 and 54" (Orenstein, 2016).

"Family history of Coronary Heart Disease, cigarette smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, low physical activity levels, diabetes mellitus, obesity, and poor nutrition are major risk factors for Cardiovascular Disease in women." (Goldman, 2013 p. 9.) However, in as much as research as determined that these are the primary risks associated with heart disease, the physical and psychological effects associated with stress and menopause significantly compound the risks and are putting New York's six-figure executive "superwomen" age 45-55, at risk of heart attack in 2017.

Cardiovascular Disease – What Is Heart Disease?

Cardiovascular disease CVD is a group of diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Coronary heart disease is one of several cardiovascular diseases where "the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle become hardened and narrowed due to a buildup of plaque on the arteries' inner walls. Plaque is the accumulation of fat, cholesterol, and other substances. As plaque continue to build up in the arteries, blood flow to the heart is reduced." (Sandmaier, 2007 p.11). This process is also known as atherosclerosis. If this blockage happens it can cause a heart attack or stroke and the heart muscle can be permanently damaged. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, heart failure, cardiomyopathy, congenital heart disease, high blood pressure, and rheumatic heart disease.

"Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death in women, both in the U.S. and worldwide. (Goldman, 2013 p. 943). Below are some alarming statistics published by the American Heart Association.

- Cardiovascular diseases and stroke cause 1 in 3 women's deaths each year, killing approximately one woman every 80 seconds.
- An estimated 44 million women in the U.S. are affected by cardiovascular diseases.
- 90% of women have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke.
- Women have a higher lifetime risk of stroke than men.
- 80% of heart disease and stroke events may be prevented by lifestyle changes and education
- Fewer women than men survive their first heart attack.
- The symptoms of heart attack can be different in women vs. men, and are often misunderstood – even by some physicians.

The underlying causes and contributors may vary depending on the disease. However, in addition to those highlighted earlier, coronary heart disease is often caused by high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, lack of exercise, obesity, high blood cholesterol, poor diet, and excessive alcohol consumption, among others. Age, family history and genetics also play a large part, and certain ethnic groups, especially African American women, are at higher risk than others.

Stress and Menopause - What Women, Age 45-55 Need to Know

Women age 45-55 are faced with unique challenges in both their personal and professional lives not necessarily shared by men or women of other age groups. Juggling the demands of competing priorities both at home and in the office, have caused an increase in stress levels which have proved to have negative effects on health and well-being. "Young and middle-age women may be more vulnerable to emotional stress because they face considerable burden of stressors in everyday life such as managing kids, marriage, jobs and caring for parents." (Heart.org, 2014.)

While stress is often thought to effect one's mental state, the physical effects to the body have been well documented. There have been studies that show its direct link to heart disease as well as other health related issues. "Emotional or psychological stress potentially contributes to heart disease in many ways, from influencing heart disease risk factors, to affecting the development of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), to triggering heart attacks." (Vaccarino, 2014)

Stress – Attacking the Mind, Body, and Heart

There has been much research done on the effect of stress on health. However, before we discuss how stress impacts health, especially in women, we must first understand what stress is. In 1936, Hans Selye an Austrian-Canadian endocrinologist embarked on extensive scientific research on the existence of biological stress. He first defined it as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change." (AIS. 2017). Merriam-Webster also defines stress as "the physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation."

There are several different types of stress including acute stress, emotional stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress. Acute Stress, is probably the most common form of stress. "It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future." (Miller, n.d.). People easily recognize this type of stress, since it is usually short term and centers around specific events, such as meeting deadlines, getting somewhere on time, or dealing with a problem at work or at home.

Episodic acute stress, occurs frequently. This happens when people are constantly dealing with stressful situations or take on too much. They always seem to be putting out fires, behind on deadlines or living in chaos. Certain personalities or lifestyle traits often contribute to those that are dealing with episodic acute stress. They might be disorganized, or have type “A” personalities or just be chronic worriers. It’s not so much the events themselves that elevate stress levels but how someone might deal with these events. They make the stress worth than they need to be.

Chronic stress however, is the most debilitating type of stress since it is ongoing and occurs every day affecting both the mind and body. People living in poverty, or in unhappy marriages or dealing with a job they hate are often victims of chronic stress. They have pressures that seem hopeless or unending and often just end up trying to live with it. “Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke and, perhaps, even cancer.” (Miller, n.d.)

Selye spent years, researching what happens biologically within the body when these changes occur and how they subside. According the Mayo Clinic, “when we feel stress, hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, are released. Once the perceived threat has passed, our hormone levels return to normal. But when stressors are always there, the stress-response system stays active, exposing us to an unhealthy amount of hormones.” (Hamill, n.d.)

Good Vs. Bad Stress – Yes, There’s a Difference!

“There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm.”

— Willa Cather, *O Pioneers! The Song of the Lark*

The types of stress I just outlined are primarily associated with negative situations, known as “Bad Stress.” However, Selye discovered and documented that stress can be both positive or negative. He referred to negative stress as “distress” and positive stress as “eustress.” Distress, can be paralyzing especially when chronic. If not relieved, it can be extremely detrimental to one’s health. “Elevated levels of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline are fine in the short term, but in the long run they lead to weakened adrenals and effect the body’s immune system.” (Hansen, 2015.)

Good stress or “eustress,” on the other hand, can inspire and motivate someone to complete a task or goal. “Eustress is usually defined by the excitement associated with identifying and overcoming an obstacle.” (Hansen, 2015.) Examples of eustress, might include the stress someone feels before making a speech, or going into a new business presentation or even having to meet a project deadline. It is brief and invigorating. This type of stress is not harmful to the body. On the contrary, “It has been proven that mild bouts of eustress have been shown to actually enhance and improve cognitive brain function. (Hansen, 2015)

“Stress is not necessarily something bad. It all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative, successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation, infection is detrimental. The stress reaction, just as energy consumption, may have good or bad effects.” (Selye, p.63.)

“Not only does stress have the power to boost brain power, it can also prepare us to better manage challenging situations in the future. Scientists from the University of California, San Francisco

studied this effect on a cellular level in a 2013 study. The results indicated that small bouts of stress keep our brains resilient and can condition us to persevere under pressure.” (Hamill, n.d.)

“Bad” Stress – Right to The Heart

The physical effects of “bad” stress can manifest itself in number of ways and researchers have linked it to depression and even memory loss. Selye later redefined stress as “The rate of wear and tear on the body.” Through studies he did on animals he demonstrated that persistent stress could cause heart attacks, stroke, kidney disease and rheumatoid arthritis (AIS, 2017)

“Persistent or chronic stress impacts every system of the body, including the respiratory, cardiovascular, and endocrine systems, according to the American Psychological Association. The impact of such intense stress can lead to changes in appetite, loss of sleep, panic and asthma attacks, heart disease, weight gain, and more.” (Hamill, n.d.)

Stress can be both a direct and indirect contributor to heart disease. Women who already have heart disease are at much higher risk of heart attack once you add elements of stress to the mix. “Young women with stable coronary heart disease are more likely than men to have reduced blood flow to the heart if they’re under emotional stress, but not physical stress, according to research presented at the American Heart Association’s Scientific Sessions 2014.” (Heart.org, 2014.) The American Heart Association also noted that compared to men of the same age, when conducting a mental stress test, women age 55 and younger had 3 times greater reduction in blood flow to the heart.

Another recent study looked at both men and women between age 30-70 with heart problems and showed that women with mental stress had a significantly greater reduction in blood flow to the heart than men. Even though women with healthy hearts were not included in this study it was assumed that there was a correlation of stress and increase heart attacks “Findings suggest that women with heart disease in their 30s, 40s and early 50s are more vulnerable to the damaging effects of psychological stress on their heart circulation.” (Walton, 2016)

In addition, there have been studies that look at the subsequent effects of the biological triggers such as hormones that can lead to heart attacks. Combining this with the hormonal imbalance that menopausal women are also experiencing puts women between the ages of 45-55 at greater risk. “Chronic activation of stress hormones can raise your heart rate, cause chest pain and/or heart palpitations (sensations that your heart is pounding or racing), and increase your blood pressure and blood lipid (fat) levels. Sustained high levels of cholesterol and other fatty substances in the blood can lead to atherosclerosis, a disease in which fatty plaques build up on blood vessel walls, restrict blood flow to the heart and sometimes lead to a heart attack.” (Mills, n.d.)

Work Place Stress - Executive Woman age 45-55

"Women of this country, you have become bread winners for your families."

*"Continue women of great courage
Continue holding on and never give up
The family's hope is in you
Hold on women of great courage, hold on"*

-Hard Working Women, Msandi Kababa

Executive women are challenged to deal with different aspects of high intensity day-to-day work related stress. The job itself may be demanding, since senior or management positions usually come with a significant amount of responsibility. They often work long hours, while continually pressured to stay relevant and on-top of their game. In a world where new technology is a driving force in today's business world, these women are forced to constantly evolve their skill sets and their business strategies. "Women who live with chronic stress and those who sleep fewer than six hours a night have higher heart disease risk." (Noonan, 2016)

A study published by the Public Library of Science, which included more than 22,000 female health professionals in the U.S. averaging 57 years old, determined that women with high job strain are 67% more likely to experience a heart attack than their counterparts in low strain jobs. "This 10-year prospective study of female health professionals revealed that women with active jobs (high demand, high control) and high strain (high demand, low control) were 38% more likely to experience a first CVD event relative to women reporting low job strain, adjusting age, race, study drug randomization, education, and income. These results suggest that women with high strain and active jobs potentially experience long-term vascular effects where high demand appears to be the critical factor" (Slopen, 2012).

It's no wonder that given the unique challenges facing this age group of women that constant exposure to this level of stress often leads to anxiety and depression. Emotional well-being is important when it comes to maintaining a healthy heart. "Stress, anxiety, depression, hostility and social isolation have all been linked to a higher risk of heart disease. There is a huge connection between the mind and the heart. Chronic stress has been associated with a 2.1 fold increase in the risk of having a heart attack, even after adjusting for age, gender, geographic region and smoking." (Steinbaum, 2013 p. 77)

Five Women – A Day in The Life

Stress levels among women can vary. Also, how women deal with stress and the impact on them both physically and mentally can be different for every woman. Below are profiles of 5 different executive level women between ranging between 46-55 years old that would consider themselves generally healthy and not necessarily at risk of heart disease. In addition, I will examine and compare some of their health and lifestyle habits as I dive deeper into my research.

Sarah

Sarah is 51 years old, living in a suburb just outside of New York City. She has been married 25 years and has one daughter currently in college. She is average height, on the thin side, with low blood pressure. She is a non-smoker, generally eats well, gets at least 7 hours of uninterrupted sleep, and

considers herself to be in good health, although she rarely exercises. She has no family history of heart disease. Sarah is currently the Vice President of Business Services in a large medical group located near her home. She has been with her company for more than 18 years and is the primary breadwinner for her family. She commutes about 30 minutes to her job and generally works 12 hour days in the office, but is available to management 24-7 by phone.

Sarah said her stress levels at her job can vary, and at times has been extreme. For example, her company recently made some changes to their systems that required hiring a new outsourced company while downsizing one third of her staff of more than 200 employees. She highlights this as one of the more stressful times in her career. She also commented, "Normally I sleep pretty sound but it was at that time I was really stressed about work. I would wake up in the middle of the night and couldn't go back to sleep." She described having frequent heart palpitations during this time which she felt was triggered by the and anxiety surrounding this highly stressful workplace situation. While she may not have been having an actual heart attack at that time, her body and her heart did have a negative physical reaction.

Sarah admitted that she will often turn to food, especially sweets or chocolate, when she feels stressed. However, she doesn't see it as a problem since she usually returns to eating healthy again quickly. She also looks to "escape" when stressed, by reading books or watching movies.

When I asked Sarah about her work-life balance she commented. "Even though I should have more time to devote to myself and for things like exercise especially, with my daughter away at college, I actually find myself staying even later at the office. Not having to be home by a certain time to make dinner, I seem to just focus more on work."

Hanna

Hanna is a 46-year-old married sales and media executive, living in Hoboken New Jersey and working in Manhattan. She often jokes, "I live less than 6 miles from my job, but with a river in between it still take me 45 minutes to get to work each day. That's what happens when you work in New York."

Hanna has been married 10 years. Taking time to settle into her marriage she first started trying to have a baby around the time she was 40 but had difficulty conceiving. Her husband lost his job around that time and so they put children on hold and she decided to focus instead on her career.

Hanna admits she "lives and breathes" her job. She has a team of 12 supporting her but still never feels she has enough staff or time to manage her business the way she would like. She travels frequently and is constantly trying to meet deadlines. "I feel stressed 99% of the time and work around the clock, nights, weekends and even vacations. I can't seem to take a vacation without having to check in or take a conference call." She is extremely organized and aims to be as productive as possible. Yet, no matter how organized the amount of work never subsides and the stress is constant.

Since Hanna was a teenager she has had to watch her weight. She eats well, brings salads to the office but adds calories through beer and wine on the weekends. For Hanna, having a few drinks on the weekend is her way to kick back and relax, but could it be doing more harm than good? She tries to exercise regularly, but finding the time has not been easy and lately it hasn't been a priority. She has struggled to try and find balance in her life. She recently started taking a yoga class once a week hoping

it will help relieve some of her stress. She has found it increasingly difficult to keep weight off and thinks it may be hormone related. Over the past 5 years she has put on about 25 pounds. While Hanna is one of the younger women in the group I interviewed, I wonder how long she can continue to keep working at this pace and neglecting her health. Where will she be in another 5 or 10 years if she doesn't make changes to her lifestyle and work-life balance?

Jill

Jill is a 53- year- old insurance executive. She has been married 20 years, has two children in college and lives in Connecticut. She recently sold her insurance brokerage business to a public company and was retained to oversee the management of 3 different offices.

Jill admits that she is addicted to caffeine and drinks at least 10 cups of coffee per day. She doesn't sleep well and says she is "up several times during the night." She is premenopausal and has not yet started to suffer from any symptoms that she is aware of. However, once she does enter menopause, consuming this amount of caffeine could be even more harmful, as it increases the production of cortisol, and can further increase stress.

When asked about stress, on a scale of 1-10, Jill already felt her life was hovering around a 13. "Besides worrying about money, and having a rebel teenage son, work is unbelievably stressful. When I owned my own business, it was a different sort of stress because I had more flexibility. Now being part of a public company I constantly have to meet and report on numbers, and it never ends." She also feels she is spread very thin, having to manage too many people across multiple offices while continuing to be a "producer" of business. She is connected to business 24-7 and always has her phone beside her. Her boss also works round-the-clock and he expects her to be available for calls late at night and weekends.

Finally, she admitted that she has started to gain weight in the last few years and attributes it directly to her poor eating habits and lack of frequent exercise. While she may not be more than a few pounds overweight right now, she will need to make some immediate changes to her daily routine if she is going to preserve her health.

Kathy

Kathy, is a 52-year old business owner, an executive coach, and growth strategist, working primarily with women. Over the years, she has worked in sales, new business development, provided coaching, and has worked with large corporations as a consultant. She is twice divorced, has no children, and lives and works in Manhattan. She considers herself to be in very good health, and is currently a non-smoker (she smoked as a teenager.) She gets to the gym at least 3 times per week and takes Yoga classes in between. She is fit, confident and spiritual and meditates several times a day. While she loves to eat, she does a good job keeping her diet in check and is extremely conscious of eating well. In fact, well-being is top of mind for Kathy. Every day she deals with professional women, coaching them on how to break old patterns, build confidence and care for themselves so that they can succeed personally and professionally.

Kathy, like others has stress in her life, everyone does. She is at a point however, where she speaks of work related stress as something that is "behind me and something that I am currently very good at managing on the day to day." Unlike the other women whom I interviewed, when I asked Kathy

about her stress she highlighted some business issues but primarily focused on a few personal situations that she has had to deal with in her past, some of which were very traumatic. “My sister died in car accident at 19-years old when I was only 17 myself. My mother died at only 50-years of age, and I lost my father to cancer about 10 years-ago. As for men, I have gone through two divorces all while dealing with my share of work related stress. You know, it comes with the territory, especially when working in corporate America or owning your own business. But now, I have to say I am in the best place I have ever been.”

Debbie

Now for my story. I’m 55 years old, a wife, and mother of two teenagers with a third in college. I’ve been married to a loving and supportive husband for close to 35 years and live in New York’s northern suburbs. I am one of two managing partners in a 20-year-old successful marketing services firm. I am generally in good health but “significantly overweight.” In the last 10-years I have put on 30-40 extra pounds and I feel like it is all work/stress related. I have always struggled with my weight. Coming from an Italian American family, food was always at the center of everything, Sunday dinners, Holidays, there was always something so comforting about it, probably one of the reasons I always seemed to turn to food when I am stressed.

My day typically starts between 5:00-5:30 AM. After a quick cup of coffee, and some catch up time with my husband I starts my 60-mile commute to lower Manhattan. I use the time on the train to catch up on work I didn’t finish the night before. It is a time that goes uninterrupted.

Work, especially in the last few years, has been unbelievably stressful. When I started this business in my 30’s it was fun. Start-ups usually are. They come with stress and long-hours but there is an energy that is invigorating and contagious. However, as my company grown, so has the stress. My partner and I are very different people, which in one sense makes us great partners as we complement each other and have different strengths. However, we frequently do not see eye-to-eye, and like a strained marriage, a strained business partnership takes its toll. Even though the company is doing well there is always the pressure to do better, to comp what you did the prior year, more sales, more profit more clients, more stress.

All the women interviewed, including myself, while in different physical shape, had several things in common. We had all felt we succeeded in our careers, make good livings, consider ourselves the primary breadwinners for our families, and putting aside the stress at work, for the most part enjoy what we do. Everyone works very long work days, and deals with different levels of work or personal stress at different times. However, I also noticed something in terms of attitude which may or may not be related to the New York culture. There was a bit of a hard edge to all of us. Even Kathy, who I would say was the most positive and optimistic of the group, described how she has to work hard each day to create a positive environment for herself and those she coaches. It didn’t seem like something that came natural for any of us.

The Weight of the World

“You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”

— *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince*

Some might question, “are executive women between the ages of 45-55 under any more stress than the average working women?” What elements of the job are uniquely stressful for professional, or executive working women as compared to other working women with less responsibilities? The key word here is responsibility. The responsibilities for most high-powered executive women typically involve oversight or management of business development, client relationships, staffing, and top and bottom-line growth. In addition, executives generally work long hours, travel for business, and their work and personal time often blur or overlap. Add this to their own specific business challenges such as competition, outside economic influences, legal issues, negotiations, partnership or senior management conflicts and we can see why women with authority or responsibility are dealing with more work-related stress than the average working women.

The pressure and responsibilities associated with running a good business, many might say weigh equally on the minds of both men and women. So why then might women at the executive level have more stress than their male counterparts? The answer may be found when looking at their gender. The qualities that often allow women to excel as leaders can also be their downfall when it comes to stress in the workplace. Women by nature are caregivers and nurturers. The responsibility for client satisfaction and especially for the lives of their employees often adds a level of stress to their day that men are better able to compartmentalize. Women excel at compassion and empathy and often demonstrate a higher level of emotional intelligence, but at times it can complicate leadership roles. According to Alyson Breathed a 60-year old marketing director with a staff of 10, “being a woman in authority is stressful. When men get to positions of authority, they’re like the chest-beating silverback gorillas; they’ve made it! But women say, ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to fire a woman with two kids.’” (Mann, 2015.) Personally, I can relate to this statement. My company is not made up of faceless, nameless robots. Every person I employ has a family and responsibility to make a living. I have never been entirely comfortable with the phrase, “It’s just business.” My partner however, who is a male, does of course care about his employees but does not seem to be personally affected in the same way, especially during times where we may need to layoff or fire staff.

In addition, many female executives continue to climb an uphill battle in terms of their position in the workplace, making an already demanding job more challenging and stressful. Even in 2017, women executives still have not reached parity with their male counterparts. “Women are less than half as likely as men to say they see a lot of people like them in senior management, and they’re right—only one in five senior executives is a woman. Women experience an uneven playing field.” (Women in the Workplace, 2016.) What about those few that have arrived or achieved their executive positions? Shouldn’t their accomplishments speak for themselves, and therefore minimize at least the stress of having to climb their way to the top? Not necessarily. Executive women continue to need to prove themselves in ways men do not. And for women age 45-55, the pressure to continue to excel may be even greater. Errica Moustaki, an executive coach at Careers in Depth, a London executive development firm, explained that many women executives “experience stressful work situations because of a

constant sense of having their confidence undermined by men. Women have to continuously prove themselves in the workplace.” (LaBier, 2015.)

The stress that impacts these women often takes a great toll both physically and mentally. Women in senior level roles, professional or executive positions may not necessarily have more personal stress than the average working woman but workplace stress is indeed compounded due to the heightened responsibilities and the unique challenges associated with their gender. According to a study conducted by Tetyana Pudrovska, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin it was concluded that “women in authority have more ‘depressive symptoms’ than do men in authority and many more than do women down the ladder.” (LaBier, 2015.) These depressive symptoms and the chronic stress can cause our executive women to spiral down. “Data from systematic reviews and meta-analyses support the association of depression with CHD (Coronary Heart Disease) incidence in initially healthy individuals. As depressive symptoms were also related to other CHD risk factors such as hypertension, diabetes, elevated cholesterol, smoking, obesity, lower physical activity.” (Goldman, 2013 p.992.)

It is critical for women especially at the executive level to find ways to manage their stress and have a support system they can lean on. The higher women go in their careers typically brings more responsibility and more work-related stress. Balancing a busy home and personal life only incorporates additional health and wellness challenges, especially as women age. Female executives especially those between the ages of 45-55 need to recognize that while you may be able to “have it all,” it may not be possible to “do it all.”

The “Sandwich Generation”

Many executive women in 2017 between the ages of 45-55 may indeed be “empty-nesters,” free of the responsibilities of having young children at home. However, we also find that women of this generation, especially those who had been focused on successfully building their careers early put off having children until later in life. They are often dealing with the stress that comes with raising teenagers, and running very busy households all while trying to handle the pressures of a demanding job. Even while holding well-paying jobs, these women are often stressed about finances, having the added burdens of college tuition bills and other expenses. In this challenging economy, many are providing a home and support to young adult children trying to launch their own careers or unable to afford to live on their own, especially in the highly expensive greater New York area. For those that did happen to have children young, some find themselves caring for grandchildren as well.

Additionally, because men and women are generally living longer these days, many women between the ages of 45-55 are finding themselves in a position of caregiver to aging parents. “According to a 2013 Pew research report, “Nearly half (47 percent) of adults in their 40s and 50s have a parent age 65 or older and are either raising a young child or financially supporting a grown child (age 18 or older). And about one-in-seven middle-aged adults (15 percent) is providing financial support to both an aging parent and a child” (Parker & Patten). This has put a tremendous burden on these women in the last few years. Since most caregivers are women, and fall into this age group, they are dealing with high levels of stress. Consequently, they fall into poor health habits, get little sleep, skip meals, or even wind up overeating. Time, attention, and financial resources are shifted from themselves to caring for other family members. As far as they are concerned, their own health and well-being becomes a lower

priority. “Women who find themselves bearing these responsibilities tend to neglect their own physical and mental health, until they reach crisis point.” (Ebelthite, 2014).

This is certainly true for Hanna, one of the executive women introduced earlier. Aside from the stress she experiences in the office, the stress at home can be just as difficult to handle. She is a caregiver to her father who lives across the street from her, and has some health issues. Her mother passed away from cancer a few years back and she and her brothers take turns looking in on their father. Her brothers have busy lives and children and given the proximity to her Dad’s house, as well as being the only “woman,” much of the responsibility falls on her shoulders. Hanna is a natural caregiver, she cares for her family, for her husband, and for her staff at work. Caring for so many others seems to leave little time for her to care for herself.

For Sarah, our medical group executive, the physical responsibilities of caregiver have lessened with her daughter away as college, however, the stress over finances still weigh heavily on her mind. Aside from college and living expenses, Sarah also has the financial burden of helping to support her mother. Her mother lives on her own, is close by and is physically fit, but has difficulty supporting herself financially, especially in the expensive greater New York area.

“According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, highly strained family caregivers are at risk for premature mortality. Other studies indicate that caregivers are at risk for increased mortality, coronary heart disease and stroke, particularly under conditions of high strain.” (S.I.A., 2014.)

Navigating the Big Apple

For those women living in New York’s metropolitan area and working in Manhattan, the added stress of commuting and the time it takes, is just one more thing that negatively impacts their day. “Workers in the Big Apple have it the worst. New York City commuters spend almost 40 minutes getting to work, according to a new report from Michael Sivak at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, an organization that studies transportation safety and sustainability. In total, they spend almost an hour and a half getting to and from the office every day.” (Clifford, 2015)

For myself, on a good day, when I am out the door by 6:00 AM, I can usually get to work by 8:15. I prefer getting an early start and consider myself a “morning person.” Leaving 15-30-minutes later usually adds an extra half hour to my commute. New York’s commuter and subway lines get crowded and are more prone to delays the closer you get to rush hour. The commute itself is very stressful. You put your life in your hands. You either continue to make your way to the front and stand on the edge of the platform risk falling onto the tracks, or you let four or five trains go by before you can squeeze your way on. Sometimes I feel like I’ve put in a full day’s work before 9:00 in the morning.

Jill, our insurance executive, who lives and works just outside of Manhattan, starts her day at 5:30 am and goes on to say, “My daily commute can average anywhere from 25 minutes to 2 ½ hours depending on which office I need to go to for the day. If I am not traveling to and from our different offices I am usually on a plane headed to a client, a supplier or even our main office. Honestly I am not sure which is worse.”

The Choices We Make – The Lives We Lead

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference*

- Robert Frost – *The Road Not Taken*

At this point I would like to introduce another group of executive women I recently had the privilege of meeting while attending a small luncheon in San Francisco held in honor and celebration of Woman's Day. There were 9 women including myself, ranging from ages 35-55 and all were founders of their own businesses. It was a beautiful sunny day as it often is in San Francisco and our lunch was served in a private room with a view of the water and the Bay Bridge. As the wine was poured, and the colorful drinks were served we spent the first hour getting to know each other. The women all appeared physically fit, impeccably groomed, and dressed in stylish casual or business casual attire. Ellen, the founder of her own line of fashion line, which specialized in designs for travel and versatility wore one of her own pieces. Her hairstyle, her make-up and everything about her seemed effortless, as did most of the other women in our party. Everyone had a big smile on their face and the positivity and enthusiasm in the room was contagious.

Other than myself, I learned that all were currently from the San Francisco Bay Area. I had traveled in for another business meeting and had been fortunate to be able to join them. It was a casual luncheon and there was no formal agenda, but we all took a few minutes once everyone arrived to go around the table and give a little bit of background on who we were, our businesses, and the career paths that led us to where we were today. I was fascinated to learn about their backgrounds and what led each of them to start their own businesses. Many of them had come from the corporate world, or initially worked for large companies, like Mary who had been in marketing for several years, or Mia who had worked for Citibank in finance. Gina and Tracy both started out as engineers for large companies and previously worked in jobs centered around product design and development.

As these women discussed what drove them to be entrepreneurs the common thread seemed to be a driving passion and commitment to do something purposeful and meaningful. Tracy discussed leveraging her expertise as an engineer to develop a line of natural and organic fabrics, which led her into designing her own line of sustainable and natural fiber T-shirts. She said she never thought she would end up as a fashion designer. Gina's story was similar in that her engineering background and her work in underdeveloped countries led her to design a line of Jewelry made in Africa, which in 2017 helps benefit local communities. Both Mary, 45, and Mia, age 52 are partners in a business whose mission and purpose was to empower young women. They teach them how to run their own businesses and provide them with the support and tools necessary to enable them to design and sell fashion, art, and jewelry online to other teenagers and young adults. I was inspired by these strong and powerful women that took steps to follow a different path, to take the risk to leave behind secure well-paying jobs for something else they believed in. While I am sure their intention was to do well in business, money did

not seem to be the primary motivator here. These women were clearly different from several of the female executives I had interviewed in New York. I wanted to learn more about them.

I spoke for quite some time to Mia. She mentioned how important it was for her to have a strong foundation in business, which she developed during her time in the corporate world. However, she went on to say, “It was time for me to leave the rat race behind. It was extremely stressful especially since I was not always able to feel in control. Owning my own business has a different level of stress, especially when it comes to shopping around for investment dollars and financing, but at least this way I feel more in control about my day to day life. I am making less money right now but my life is more balanced.” I asked her a bit about her health and her daily routine. Mia went on to say, “I’ve always worked out in the morning, I like to run, and for me it’s easier than getting to the gym. Even when I worked for Citibank, I didn’t start till 9:00 so there was plenty of time to get in a run before going to the office.” She mentioned to me, that her commute from just outside of the city only took about 35 minutes. She also added, “My running is a stress reliever, it gets my day going and I rarely miss a day during weekdays, except when the weather is very cold and rainy. Only this year did we see a lot of that and I just made more of a point to run a bit more on the weekends.”

Exercise, or some level of physical activity seemed to be a regular part of the lives of just about every woman in the room. I had wondered if it had something to do with the west coast culture especially when Pam, one of the digital marketing executives I spoke with, mentioned that fitting workouts into her day was a part of her regular routine. She said to me, “everyone works out in the Bay Area, I’m always out doors with my kids or hiking. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.” According to 2016 Health Rankings report, California is one of the states that ranks highest for physical activity and continues to move positively in that direction. “In the past year, physical *inactivity* decreased 8% from 21.7% to 20.0% of adults.” Interestingly, New York which in that same report was found to have a lower prevalence of obesity as compared to many other states across the country had a high prevalence of physical inactivity.

As the food was served, a selection of healthy vegetables and sushi, was shared among our group. I felt as if I was in a different world, a different culture. I thought about the business luncheons we often have in New York and how the restaurants or the menu is not always focused on healthy food and how our meals are often rushed. In fact, I thought of how many days a week I find myself skipping lunch altogether or trying to gobble down a quick salad or sandwich in between meetings.

Ellen a striking woman in her late 30’s sat on my left side. She was younger than most of the other women at our lunch. I asked her about her busy life. She had three children all under the age of six but seemed very together and did not appear stressed. In her case, she had a strong support system at home, and she mentioned that she runs her business without putting in tremendous hours, since she worked primarily from home.

Of all the women in the room, Angie, a 48-year-old digital marketing consultant, from San Jose, seemed to have more similar challenges in work-life balance to the female executives I interviewed from New York. Angie recently left her job as a Vice President of a large retailer after 25 years of working long days and an hour-plus commute. She said to me, “The hours and the commute were killing me, not to mention the stress of the corporate politics. I needed a change; my family and my health were suffering. I had no time for exercise, I wasn’t eating right, and I felt stressed all the time. No one I knew

had this crazy life, and I knew it was time to get out.” Angie, was unique, in our group in that many of the others I spoke with at the luncheon did not complain about working long hours or even having long commutes. In fact, most of the women I spoke with either worked remotely part of the time, or had less than a 30-minute commute each day. “The evidence suggests that New York City residents do work relatively more hours compared to residents of other major cities. Long workweeks are especially common among certain professions in New York City. Moreover, New Yorkers have longer average commutes than residents of any other major city. When work hours are combined with unusually long trips to work, the combined workweeks of city residents are the longest in the country.” (Reports - NYC Comptroller, 2015.)

It also must be noted that most of that long working hours may vary by industry as well as by city. “In New York City, workers in the finance sector, on average, work the longest workweeks. With usual work schedules topping 47 hours, New York City financial workers spend, on average, almost four hours more per week working than do their counterparts in other large cities. That difference is probably due to both the corporate culture of New York City finance firms, as well as to the nature of the business operations performed here (investment banking versus loan processing, for example). Longer work hours (relative to other cities) are also characteristic of New York’s advertising, media, computer, and legal services industries. For example, workers in advertising in other large cities work relatively long 45-hour workweeks, but average workweeks in New York’s advertising industry are about 1 hour, 38 minutes longer.” (Reports - NYC Comptroller, 2015.)

I also noticed one difference among the older women at our table. Many of them discussed the importance of work-life balance and were focused on achieving and maintaining it, while the younger women seemed to integrate it more naturally. The generational work attitudes of baby-boomers seemed to be reflected in the lives of Angie and Mia even though the cultural attitudes of New York women and California women appeared to be a bit different. In any case, both women mentioned that they often felt that the long hours and stress of the corporate world did negatively affect their health. A research study conducted by Allard Dembe, an Ohio State University professor of health services management and policy, interviewed 7,500 women as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, which tracked adults born between 1957 and 1964 over a 32-year period. “Dembe and his colleagues found that women who worked an average of 60 hours or more over the three decades of the study had three times the risk of getting diabetes, cancer, heart trouble and arthritis than those who worked 40-hour weeks.” (Zarya, 2016.)

All the women I interviewed both on the east and west coast were successful executives or business owners. However, there appeared to be differences in terms of culture and attitude. They all had busy lives juggling priorities of work and family, but for the most part the women in San Francisco seemed to do a better job prioritizing health and well-being over those in New York. They also seemed more positive and happier. The women in San Francisco appeared less stressed and more in control of their schedules and their lives overall. The Bay Area women seemed to be less focused on the financial aspects of their careers as compared to the women in New York, given the career paths they chose and our conversation that day.

I had assumed the San Francisco ladies were healthier and at less risk of heart disease than those I interviewed in New York. Perhaps they were. However, surprisingly, according to America’s

Health Ranking California, ranks #16 in terms of overall Health of its residents while New York ranks higher at #13. There can be many reasons for this and it may also be partly due to the greater disparity of education and income in California as compared to New York. But, despite the strong health ranking of New York, Cardiovascular disease is still a big concern. New York indexed slightly below average and ranked 33 when looking at deaths due to CVD. California had much better numbers and ranked #19. So, while all executive women between the ages of 45-55 should be concerned about the risks of heart disease, those in New York may need to pay closer attention to their health and lifestyle habits.

Stress Cardiomyopathy - “Broken Heart Syndrome”

*“Not with a club, the Heart is broken,
Nor with a stone;
A whip, so small you could not see it,
I've known”*

-Emily Dickinson - “Not with a club, the Heart is broken”

I would like to now turn the discussion to a different type of stress which also affects the heart. “Stress Cardiomyopathy, also referred to as the ‘broken heart syndrome,’ is a condition in which intense emotional or physical stress can cause rapid and severe heart muscle weakness (cardiomyopathy). This condition can occur following a variety of emotional stressors such as grief (e.g. death of a loved one), fear, extreme anger, and surprise. It can also occur following numerous physical stressors to the body such as stroke, seizure, difficulty breathing (such as a flare of asthma or emphysema), or significant bleeding.” (Zidwick, 2014)

Stress Cardiomyopathy is a different type of heart attack. Symptoms are quite similar for patients experiencing myocardial infarction resulting from heart disease, and may also include chest pain, shortness of breath and low blood pressure. However, stress cardiomyopathy is something quite different. Heart attacks usually occur when blockages and blood clots form in the coronary arteries that supply the heart with blood, but in cases of Stress Cardiomyopathy, the heart may be quite healthy and free of coronary artery disease.

This unique and fairly new syndrome was first extensively researched in the 1990’s. “Japanese doctors, who were the first to describe this condition, named it “takotsubo” because during this disorder, the heart takes on a distinctive shape that resembles a Japanese pot used to trap an octopus.” (Bahatt, 2015). Massive amounts of adrenaline triggered by extreme emotional stress may cause the arteries to narrow and resulting in a temporary decrease of blood flow to the heart. However, in most cases this syndrome only temporarily weakens the heart, and there is no long-term damage, unlike traditional heart attacks. In cases where heart attacks are triggered by coronary disease, the heart muscle, once damaged, never fully recovers.

Almost 90% of stress cardiomyopathy cases occur in post-menopausal women. According to a 2010 study conducted by the Cleveland Clinic, Department of Internal Medicine “Lack of estrogen replacement in the postmenopausal state may predispose women to takotsubo cardiomyopathy” (Kuo, 2010.)

In addition, stress cardiomyopathy can sometimes be triggered by the stress that accompanies other physical diseases. Martha Lanier an active and successful motivational speaker was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 60. Prior to, and just after her mastectomy surgery she embarked on an aggressive physical fitness regimen to aid in her recovery. Six months after her surgery she stepped things up and started training for the Aflac Iron Girl Triathlon. She was in the best physical shape of her life. Four weeks after the completion of her triathlon she suffered an unexpected heart attack. "With a diagnosis of Stress Cardiomyopathy, she experienced first-hand what can happen when we let everyday stress control our lives. Trying to be invincible, she was a do-all/be-all woman. Physically she was in the best condition of her life. Mentally she was unaware she had high levels of self-induced mental stress. Her cardiologist explained that Stress Cardiomyopathy is brought on by uncontrolled mental stress over a long period of time." (Triathlon Inspires, n.d.)

Martha's situation does exactly correspond to what I noted earlier as the primary triggers of Stress Cardiomyopathy. She was indeed in great physical shape, and she did have a previous cancer illness, but there were no sudden emotional or traumatic stressors that triggered her heart attack. In her case, she had been suffering from chronic stress, due to rebuilding her business after her illness, publishing a book and dealing with some personal issues. For Martha, the compounding stress over a longer period triggered this syndrome. She did recover almost immediately, and because she was in such great physical shape, it aided in a quick recovery.

Another example involves the case of a 64-year-old Asian woman who was admitted to the emergency room complaining of abdominal cramping and chest pains which radiated through her neck and arm. She certainly appeared to be having a heart attack. Tests showed that her arteries were normal and unblocked but that her mid and apical ventricular segments were dilated and consistent with takotsubo cardiomyopathy. The patient had been under stress for several months due to the death of a parent. "Unlike previously reported cases, our patient appeared to develop the syndrome as a result of chronic rather than acute stress. Furthermore, although the death of a parent is the most commonly reported stressor, since this occurred almost one month earlier suggests that chronic stress may also predispose a patient to takotsubo cardiomyopathy." (Nauman, 2008.)

While Stress Cardiomyopathy may indeed be a very different type of heart attack and may not be directly related to heart disease, the link between stress and its effects on the heart are undoubtedly apparent. In most cases Stress Cardiomyopathy can be triggered by sudden and the most extreme emotional stressors. However, as illustrated in these two cases, chronic or long-term stress can be so provoking that it can trigger heart attacks even in the healthiest of women. Even though these women were in their early 60's, imagine then what acute or chronic stress can do to a woman just a few years younger especially if she is menopausal and has even one other associated risk factor of heart disease.

Martha Lanier now often speaks on behalf of the American Heart Association and focuses her presentations on how important it is for women to properly manage stress especially when it comes to protecting one's heart. She is an example of how powerful and debilitating stress can be especially when it comes to our hearts.

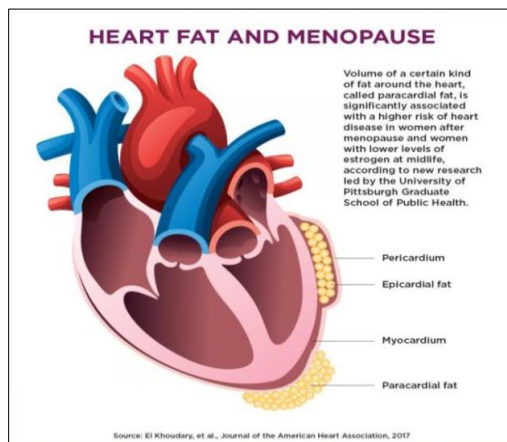
Menopause – It's Inevitable

Another significant and unique challenge that women age 45-55 face is the onset of menopause. There are well known side effects and symptoms associated with menopause such as lack of sleep, irritability and forgetfulness that can impact job performance, and contribute to additional mental stress in the workplace. However, the physical side effects of menopause associated with the significant decrease in estrogen, can trigger health related issues directly affecting the heart. "You are also at a greater risk for heart disease since your estrogen is gone." (Steinbaum, 2013 p. 317) When estrogen levels drop, the heart and blood vessels become stiff and less elastic and may cause a rise in blood pressure adding strain to the heart. A lack of estrogen also can cause cholesterol levels to increase.

Women may also see an increase in abnormal heart rhythms like atrial fibrillation around the time they go through menopause. The change in hormones causes faster heart rates. Atrial fibrillation can also be brought on by high blood pressure, which is more common after menopause. (Orenstein, 2016).

In addition, estrogen also affects where women store fat and how it is burned. As the metabolism slows weight gains are common. Obesity is one of the major contributors to heart disease and menopause only compounds the struggles for many of this age group to keep control of their weights "The rising obesity epidemic may have slowed the decline (in heart disease), particularly for women, and it has been noted that in women aged 35-54 years the rates of heart disease deaths maybe increasing." (Goldman, 2013 p.9)

Finally, diabetes which puts women at a higher risk for heart disease and stroke can develop or worsen during this time. "When women go through menopause, they can also become more resistant to insulin, the hormone needed to convert blood sugar and starches into energy for cells to use." (Orenstein, 2016)



Menopausal Hormone Therapy – Making Matters Worse

As I previously noted, since reduced estrogen levels have been connected to an increase in heart disease, it was initially thought that hormone therapy could help ward off heart disease. However, the opposite has been found to be true. Long term use of hormone therapy poses serious risks of heart

disease. Studies launched by the Women's Health Initiative concluded that, "estrogen-plus-progestin therapy increase women's risk for heart attacks, stroke, blood clots and breast cancer." Estrogen-alone therapy did not prove to have any effects on heart disease, but did increase the risk for stroke and blood clots. (Sandmaier, 2007 p. 50).

To make things even more challenging many of these women are who are pre-or-post-menopausal often complain of mental slippage and forgetfulness. This brings unique challenges in the work place especially as they try to stay competitive. Studies have been done to assess links of lowering female hormone levels with changes in cognition. While these studies have been inconclusive, there is some evidence, "To keep up, their brains showed far more exertion, on average, in parts of the brain that govern and support short-term memory." (Healy, 2011)

The Superwoman Syndrome

"Striving to better, oft we mar what's well."

— William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Today's confident, educated, successful executive woman understands more than the generations that came before her, the importance of keeping fit, eating right, rest and good health practices. Yet the need to be "Superwomen" is a problem for many, especially those between the ages of 45-55. What attitudes and values are unique to New York's "having-achieved-it-all" baby boomer generation of women that result in neglect of their health and well-being?

Brookline's Allison Rimm, a sought-after executive coach, specializing in leadership development and strategy consulting has been working with women to address this specific problem. "You have these brilliant, creative, talented, hard-working women who are miserable because they lack any kind of sense of plan and prioritization in their own lives," Rimm says. "My heart broke. These people work so hard and are spread so thin and feel they can't do anything well." (Baskin, 2015)

For myself work has become all consuming. Over the years, I haven't been concerned with successfully balancing all the wonderful things in my life; my husband, my son, my friends, my extended family or even my interests outside of my work. As a result, my relationships and my own wellbeing have suffered. I have been aware of it, yet still seem drawn to what pulls at me the hardest, which is work. I know what my priorities should be yet seem unwilling to make changes. I seem convinced I can do it all. "the decision to step down from a position of power—to value family over professional advancement, even for a time—is directly at odds with the prevailing social pressures on career professionals in the United States." (Slaughter, 2012).

Why do women of this ethnography often put their careers ahead of everything else? What motivates them to try and take on so much and live as they do? Is this behavior really limited to only a small subset of executive women between the ages of 45-55 living in New York, or is there a larger generation of women that value this unique, and very driven work-ethic?

It's Who I Am

"Till this moment, I never knew myself."

- Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice

Women's rights, higher education, increase in divorce rate, and the availability of birth control changed the views of many women growing up in the 60's and 70's, and were catalysts regarding their reasons and decision to work. For many ambitious baby boomers, working outside of the home became part of their identity. "Rather than jobs, most (boomer women) see employment as part of a long-term career. Most perceive their work as a fundamental aspect of their satisfaction in life and view their place of work as an integral part of their social world. They have added identity to their decision about whether to work or not to work given changes in wages and incomes. Leaving the workplace involves a loss in identity for a woman, just as being unemployed or retired has commonly involved a loss of prestige and social belonging to most men." (Goldin, 2006). This is just one of the reasons why so many women, especially those who reached high-level executive roles in their 40's and 50's may be reluctant to pull back, even if it means risking their own health.

However, this is broad generalization and there are many women, even successful executives that have started to reevaluate their priorities. "Today, however, family happiness, relationships, and balancing life and work, along with community service and helping others, are much more on the minds of Generation X and Baby Boomers. A woman in her forties, who left HBS about 20 years ago, told us: 'For me, at age 25, success was defined by career success. Now I think of success much differently: Raising happy, productive children, contributing to the world around me, and pursuing work that is meaningful to me.'" (Ammerman, 2015).

Feministic Pressure – Defining Success

"The American definition of a successful professional is someone who can climb the ladder the furthest in the shortest time, generally peaking between ages 45 and 55." (Slaughter, 2012).

Many women of this generation feel pressured and a sense of obligation to society and women at large to step up and take on demanding careers while trying to balance their roles as caregiver. Anne-Marie Slaughter, an international lawyer, foreign policy analyst, public commentator, and author of "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," commented in her publicly acclaimed article, "Women of my generation have clung to the feminist credo we were raised with, even as our ranks have been steadily thinned by unresolvable tensions between family and career, because we are determined not to drop the flag for the next generation." (Slaughter, 2012).

I was in my 30's when I started my business. I had left my previous job because I felt starting my own business was the next logical progression in my career. It wasn't so much about money, but there was something more that drove me to take this next step. I don't know if it was as much about satisfying my ego as much as it was I needed to constantly move forward. Honestly, looking back I don't know that I ever really wanted my own business, but I also knew this is how success was defined in my industry. It was expected.

“Regardless, it is clear which set of choices society values more today. Workers who put their careers first are typically rewarded; workers who choose their families are overlooked, disbelieved, or accused of unprofessionalism.” (Slaughter, 2012).

We’re All a Bit Afraid Sometime

“Fear is at the root of so many of the barriers that women face. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making the wrong choice, Fear of drawing negative attention. Fear of overreaching. Fear of being judged. Fear of failure. And the holy trinity of fear; the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter.”

“What would you do if you weren’t afraid?”

-Lean In, Sheryl Sandberg

Women in their late 40’s and early 50’s, often at the height of their careers, having navigated the working world for many years know what to expect. They have already climbed the corporate ladder, may own their own businesses, or are in senior management roles within their companies. Most would assume that these well experienced executive women, are proficient at their jobs, have successfully learned to navigate office politics, have achieved the highest compensation levels of their career, and should have nothing left to prove in terms of their accomplishments. As far as family life is concerned their children are typically teenagers or young adults. Many are also married or settled in long-term relationships. Yet the ironic truth is many often grow more insecure as time goes on. They live in fear of losing all they have built, of maybe falling off the pedestal.

Many successful executive women between the ages of 45-55 are working longer and harder than ever. They are often the primary bread-winners in their homes, and therefore are under enormous pressure to continue to draw high salaries. They may have concern about the future and retirement, which triggers anxiety “Add to the mix empty nest syndrome, health issues, as well as the fact many women feel invisible to the world as they age, and self-esteem can plummet while anxiety takes hold.” (Miller, n.d.). This anxiety can then manifest into chronic stress which can lead to additional health risks including heart disease.

Women of this age also have unique challenges that didn’t exist years prior. The technology boom has changed the world. There are opportunities to be more efficient in the workplace which should relieve some of this pressure but these women are also having to learn new methods, evolve their business skills, stay relevant and navigate a business world that is ever changing. They are pressured to compete in industries that are evolving at an extremely fast pace and with men and women 10-20 years younger who are more current and up-to-date on latest technologies.

However, this is not necessarily a challenge for everyone. I asked Jill if she ever felt that getting older was a handicap, if she felt that it was more difficult to do her job or if in anyway did she feel she had lost her edge. She recognizes the pressure to stay relevant but still felt has sharp and as strong as ever. “I just get tired easier. It’s not as fun as it once was especially the whole sales game. When I’m out with clients, after dinner I just want to go to my room and go to bed.”

People Pleasers

When I asked Sarah to describe her personality and how she approaches her work she replied, “I would say at work I am a type A personality, a perfectionist, I need everything done exactly right, and I needed it immediately. I get very impatient. In fact, as I get older I do seem to be more irritable. On the other hand, I am also a ‘people pleaser,’ I never say no, especially to my boss.” She told me a story that occurred just this past weekend. “My boss called me on Friday night at 8:30 and told me that a patient complaint that had been posted on our Facebook site. He wanted to make sure I would get back to her immediately.” The age of technology and the ability to be available 24-7 is another interesting element of how stress in business is compounded. Both employers and customers have expectations that we are available at all times.

In Kerrie Lee Brown’s book “My Heart, My Self,” she describes how to recognize the daily stressors that can affect your healthy. One of them is the “people pleaser syndrome.” She asks “Are you a people-pleaser? Do you put the needs of others before your own almost all of the time? Do you make sure everyone else is okay and disregard your well-being? Do your goals aspirations, extracurricular activities, and personal care (self-love) take a backseat to appease others?”

About the Money

Sarah claimed her primary motivation for working so hard is purely financial. “Years ago, when I was starting out I was looking to get ahead in my career. Now it’s really all about money and supporting my family, getting my daughter through college, until we are ready to sell the house.” This seemed to be the case for most of the women I interviewed, especially those over 50 years old.

Jill as the primary bread winner for her family, admitted to me that she lives above her means and constantly feels the pressure of her finances, especially with two kids in college. She said “I don’t need more money, and really don’t care about getting rich. I just want to make sure I cover my bill’s and continue to live comfortably.”

My reasons for working as hard as I do are very much like those of Jill and Sarah. However, my concern over financial security is something that stems from my childhood. When I was a teenager my parent’s marriage fell apart and they divorced. Times were different back then and my mother was left without much money or any assets (everything was in my father’s name) and she had difficulty supporting herself since up until that point she was a stay-at-home mom and a housewife. It was then I told myself I would never be reliant on someone else for financial support. I would have my own money. Since I’ve largely been self-supportive even though my husband also contributes to our household income, I am reluctant to lose control or power over my finances.

However, for many women especially those on the younger end of the spectrum, those that boarder as Gen X’s, money is important but may represent something different. Over the years, Hanna, the media executive I interviewed, worked her way up from an Account Executive to Executive Vice President. She told us that much of her compensation is based in commissions. The harder she works the more she benefits financially. However, she considers herself a frugal person and doesn’t live above her means, and it’s not the money that drivers her but what it represents. She told me “it’s not so much about the money but what it means in terms of what I have been able to accomplish and exceeding my business goals each year.”

Heart Disease and Executive Women Age, 45-55 – Are They Truly at Risk?

An argument can be made that risks of heart attack have not increased in the 21st century for 45-55-year-old executive women especially given their typical demographics and lifestyle habits. In 2017, we find that high-power executive working women are mostly college educated, have above average incomes and often have more flexibility in the workplace. They understand the value of exercise and good health and can afford to eat well, join a gym, and care for themselves in ways that women in lower socioeconomic situations are not able to. So, is there really a reason to be concerned about this group of women? I believe there is.

Demographics & Ethnicity

When trying to understand the risks for executive women age 45-55, we may first want to consider any evidence associated with specific demographic and ethnic backgrounds of women that have been determined to be at high risk of heart disease. One of the most important factors to consider is age. Generally, the older women are, the higher the risk factor is for heart attack. “Eight Million women in the U.S. are currently living with heart disease and 435,000 American women have heart attacks annually. However, 83,000 are under age 65 and 35,000 are under 55. The average age is 70.4.” (Women’s Heart Foundation, n.d). Still we must also consider that given women are working longer and retiring later in life and well into their 70’s we can assume that heart attacks and heart disease are now more common among working women and not necessarily limited to the retired set.

Next, there are studies that have shown that certain ethnic groups of women are generally at higher risk of heart disease than others. The highest ethnic group at risk are African-American women. “Of African-American women ages 20 and older, 48.3% have cardiovascular disease.” (Go Red For Women, 2016.) There are many factors that contribute to this including family history, diabetes, smoking, obesity, and high cholesterol, which are more common among African-American women than other ethnic groups. We may also assume that several of these health issues may correlate to lower economic status, especially when it comes to poor eating or health habits. “But even after adjustment for factors related to socioeconomic differences, disparities in rates of heart disease and its risk factors persist. In the United States, nearly half of all black adults have some form of cardiovascular disease, compared with about one-third white adults. A genetic difference that predisposes blacks to high blood pressure might play a role.” (Harvard Health, 2015.)

What about other ethnic groups? “Hispanics and Latinos have higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other cardiovascular risk factors compared with whites. “Yet they appear to have lower rates of heart disease, which is counterintuitive,” says Dr. Enrique Caballero, who directs the Latino Diabetes Initiative at the Harvard-affiliated Joslin Diabetes Center. (Harvard Health, 2015.) While Hispanic women overall are at less risk of heart disease than other ethnic groups, an argument can be made that their risk of heart disease is still of some concern for working women between the age of 45-55 since when they do contract heart disease it is at a younger age than most other ethnic groups. “Hispanic women are likely to develop heart disease 10 years earlier than Caucasian women.” (Go Red For Women, 2016)

So, if there is evidence to suggest that certain demographic or ethnic groups are at greater risk of Heart disease than others, the next question would then be, how does that compare to the demographic and ethnic groups that most represent 45-55-year-old high-power executive working?

“Employed Asian and White women were more likely to work in high-paying management, professional, and related occupations (49 percent and 43 percent, respectively) in 2014 than were employed Black (35 percent) and Hispanic (26 percent) women.” (BLS Reports, 2015.)

Still, putting aside demographics, ethnicity and even genetics, lifestyle and health habits are some of the biggest factors when it comes to determining which women are at risk of heart attack over those who are not. "While we recognize and embrace the differences that come with race, the biological differences between people are, for the most part, not as great as the environmental influences that may influence health," says Dr. Eldrin Lewis, a cardiologist at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital. (Harvard Health, 2015). If executive women ages 45-55, are eating poorly, neglecting their health, and leading highly stressful lives during a time when menopause is creating hormonal imbalance in their system, the risks of heart disease can be as high for them as any other woman and in some cases more so.

It's in the Genes

One of the most significant risk factors for heart disease stems around family history. “As the number of first-degree relatives with a history of coronary heart disease CHD increases, the risk of CHD increases with evidence suggesting that CHD in second-degree relatives may further increase risk. The risk is strongest when CHD in first-degree relatives occurs before age 60 years. Women with a history of parental myocardial infarction at ages less than or equal to 60 years, had an early three-fold increased risk of non-fatal myocardial infarction and a five-fold increased risk of fatal CHD compared to women without such a history. The increased risk of CHD associated with a family history of the disease is likely due to both genetic and shared environmental factors.” (Goldman, 2013 p. 951).

Kathy, the executive coach I had interviewed, gave me some background on her family history, that would cause concern. Her mother's death at 50-years old was due to a heart condition that went undiagnosed. Her grandmother also died in her early 60's from a heart attack. Several years ago, she was going through a very stressful time both personally and professionally, separating from her husband as well as her business partner. Even though Kathy exercised and generally ate well, given her family history in addition to her stress, she was at significant risk of heart attack. At the urging of a friend she went to a doctor to get checked out. Fortunately, all tests came back clear, but she realized that she needed to take steps to eliminate stress in her life and focus on her own well-being or she would be in trouble. “I think it was at that time I decided to throw myself into my coaching. It was as much for me as it was for the people I could help.”

Kathy is still clearly at risk of heart disease given her family history, so it is imperative that she continues to watch her diet, exercise and manage her stress levels. Had she not recognized her risks and continued to stay in both a toxic business partnership and marriage she might have had a different story. “We have all had moments in life when we look back and say, ‘I could have chosen another path, but I did not.’ I could have believed that my twisting chest was a muscle pull and ignored it.” (Heffernan, p.34).

Exercise, Weight Control and Your BMI

To rise the top, executive working women are generally self-motivated and driven. They are disciplined, and have set routines. While many find it difficult to make time for exercise, most successful career women recognize the importance of good health and well-being personally and professionally. They try and watch their weight and make exercise part of our routine since projecting this good self-image is very important. "A research study, co-authored by Mark Roehling, Michigan State University professor, and Patricia Roehling, professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, found that only 5 percent of male and female CEOs at top U.S. companies were obese with a body mass index (BMI) over 30. This is much lower than the U.S. average percentage of obese men and women, which is currently at 36% (men) and 38% (women) for the same age group. (Only 5 percent – 22 percent of top female CEOs were overweight." (Forbes, 2012) Since obesity has been identified as one of the major factors in heart disease, it would then seem logical to assume that most high-power executive women would not be at risk. The founder and CEO of that executive search firm said, "Good physical fitness is critical to success as an executive in today's work world. The days of a little extra padding being a sign of maturity and success are gone." When asked about obesity, 75% of executives said that being overweight is a "serious career impediment." (Health Style Fitness, n.d.)

In addition to weight control, most successful working women will admit that exercise provides benefits for the mind and spirit. "Successful people like to jump start their day with an abundance of energy and the feel-good endorphins that exercise offers. Recent studies identify the direct correlation between fitness and success." (Health Style Fitness, n.d.). These endorphins can also act as a stress reliever. "It improves your mood. Regular exercise can increase self-confidence, it can relax you, and it can lower the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety. Exercise can also improve your sleep, which is often disrupted by stress, depression and anxiety." (Mayo Clinic, 2015).

The question we must ask however, is while the most powerful of women, including CEO's may be taking good care to exercise and eat right is this a typical practice among executive working women overall? Also, while we understand the benefits of exercise are most of us following through with healthy routines? In a health survey of 369 North American professionals (largely drawn from Fortune 500 co companies), conducted by Meghan FitzGerald, EVP of Strategy, M & A and Health Policy at Cardinal Health, many women reported to be concerned about their overall health. According FitzGerald, "More than 50% of respondents said they log over 50 hours a week in the office and take work home with them as well. The top 5% of earners put in the longest hours, with 50% of those earning over \$250,000 working 70+ hours a week. Working so much also makes it hard to find time to exercise: 50% exercise two days or fewer per week, and 25% said they had not participated in any physical exercise within the past month. Even though wealthier women were less likely to be overweight and more likely to get at least some exercise, 41% of all the women in my sample reported being overweight, and 25% said they wanted to lose more than 25 pounds." (FitzGerald, 2016).

When I asked Jill about her daily routine the one word that she said came to mind was "inconsistent." Jill appears to be physically fit, plays golf regularly (both for pleasure and for business), likes to ski, and tries to exercise as often as she can. However, she says it has become increasingly more difficult to find the time to get to the gym. According to Jill, "Work just seems to get in the way. I travel around 3 times per month and I just eat junk when I'm on the road." She also mentioned that since her

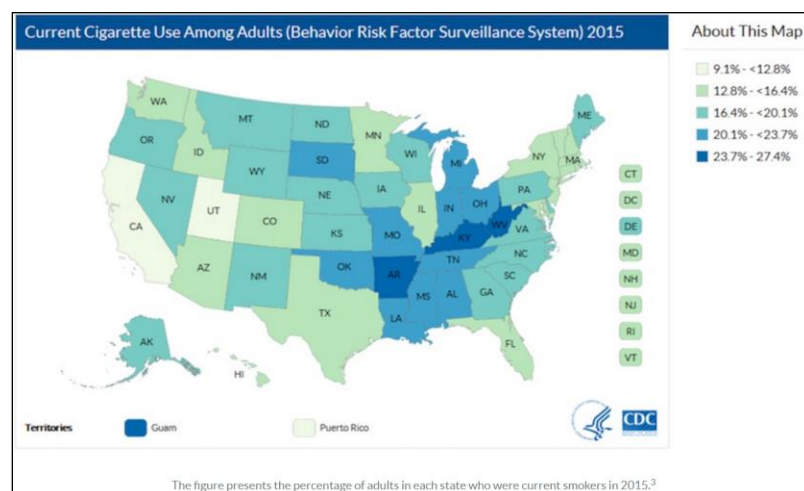
children went off to college she no longer feels the need to cook, and doesn't eat regular meals, and when she does eat dinner its often late at night. She has started to gain weight and attributes it directly to her poor eating habits and lack of exercise.

For me, I feel my weight and lack of exercise is one of my biggest concerns surrounding my health. When I was younger, and up until about 10 years ago, my daily routine included a 2-mile run in the morning or at least a 30-minute work out on the stair climber before heading to the office. But in the last few years, I feel like I no longer have the time or the energy to work out. Instead of doing my typical run every morning my time is now spent in a 2-hour plus commute. My evenings are spent trying to squeeze what little time I have with my family, before working again late into the night. Like Jill, I also travel quite a bit for work. Finding healthy food on the road and in airports is challenging. However, even when I do have the opportunity to make healthy choices the stress that I experience day in and day out often leaves me searching for "comfort food." A lack of exercise, poor diet, extra weight compounded by stress and the effects of menopause puts me at serious risk of heart disease.

Smoking – A Habit Hard to Break, True or False?

The other major risk factor associated with heart disease is smoking. The good news however is that smoking has been on the decline across the board. "About 50 years ago, roughly 42 percent of U.S. adults smoked. It was common nearly everywhere — in office buildings, restaurants, airplanes and even hospitals. The smoking rate's gradual decline has coincided with an increased public understanding that smoking is a cause of cancer, heart disease and other lethal health problems." (Stobbe, 2016.) In 2013 only 13.6% of U.S. women currently smoked cigarettes. However, the 45-65 age group was the highest at 18.1% (CDC, 2016.)

Smoking percentages also varied when factoring income, ethnicity, and education level. Current cigarette smoking was lowest among those with bachelors or graduate degrees (approximately 7%) and higher among persons living below the poverty level." (CDC, 2016.) Finally, when we look at the distribution of smokers geographically, New Yorkers are on the lower side compared to the rest of the country.



Since most executive women are highly educated and fall into higher income brackets, once we consider the lower smoking statistics in the New York area, we do not find smoking to be a major risk factor for heart disease for this group of women at large. None of the women I interviewed in New York or San Francisco were cigarette smokers.

The Sum of its Parts - The Multiplier Effect

There can be a case made that high-power executive women between 45-55 years old and living in the New York Areas do not appear to be at significant risk of heart disease since they are primarily, white, or Asian, have higher incomes, are more educated, and generally understand the importance of good lifestyle habits that include, eating well, exercise and an avoidance of smoking. In fact, some might argue that these women are at lower risks of heart disease. However, none of these factors should be isolated and the effects of both menopause and stress cannot be minimized. In a recent study, "Women who reported having highly demanding jobs were nearly twice as likely (88%) to have a heart attack than women who didn't have such stressful jobs. The high-strain women were also 43% more likely to have a bypass procedure. Overall, the increase in heart-disease risk in high-strain workers versus their low-strain counterparts was 40%" (Healthland Time.com).

It is clear at this point that there are several unique and independent factors that contribute to heart disease. However, when women are at risk for more than one factor, the "The Multiplier Effect" can be devastating. For women between the ages of 45 and 55 the impact of both stress and menopause is of great concern. "Having two risk factors increases the chance of developing heart disease fourfold. Having three risk factors increases the chance more than tenfold." (Sandmaier, 2007 p.13). Working women of this age group, especially those with demanding jobs need to be particularly mindful of their risks if they do not take steps to make lifestyle changes and focus on their own health and well-being.

Small Steps Toward Big Change – A Holistic Approach to a Healthy Heart

Incorporating healthy eating habits and exercise are the first steps all women should take to help prevent heart disease. However, as we have determined the risks of heart attack for executive women between the ages of 45-55 go beyond weight control. In addition to the major risk factors most of us are familiar with, we now know that stress and menopause can play a major part in heart disease. Therefore, taking a holistic approach towards all aspects of healthy living and heart disease prevention are necessary to ensure a healthy heart.

Approaching the problem from several perspectives and taking small steps can help permanently change behavior and provide solutions. Attacking it aggressively from only one angle does not typically solve the problem, especially since the "Multiplier Effect" has shown us how the chance of heart attack substantially increases when more than one risk is involved. In addition, trying to change long ingrained habits cannot happen overnight. Drastic changes can be difficult to manage and cause many women to become overwhelmed and give up. Instead, I recommend taking an approach that incorporates methods that executive women use every day in their business. Accomplished female executives understand that setting goals and proactive planning is essential to achieving success. They recognize, the importance of prioritization and client/employee relationships when helping a business to thrive. Most important they know that to move forward you must constantly monitor progress.

Therefore, by applying a similar methodology to their own lives which includes, goal setting, planning and monitoring of progress they can be extremely effective.

Healthy living practices start at home. However, for many women who spend more than 60 hours a week at the office or on the road conducting business, there must be a plan that can be applied everywhere in order women to truly improve their health and lifestyle. It is critical that employers and businesses are aware of the unique problems impacting women of this age group and that the women themselves are focused on it as well. What else can a businesses and government do to help? How can employers help relieve stress, which is clearly detrimental to a woman's health and may be a significant contributor to heart disease and heart attack? How can the government and employers of small, medium, and large size businesses work together to provide support and solutions to this unique group of women which represents a significant and extremely valuable segment of society and our workforce?

Recognizing the Risks and the Signs!

I thought I was fine, handling everything to the best of my ability as a mom, wife and employee, but in hindsight I was quite out of shape in the ways that count towards a healthy existence."

– Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum

Most women in the executive level understand the overall benefits of good health and well-being. However, many of these "superwomen" often need to be reminded of what good health practices mean for them, and that they too, are often at risk. Many women of this age do not realize their risk of heart disease increases when various factors such as ongoing stress and even menopause compound the more typical and well know factors such as obesity, smoking, diabetes, and family history. "Based on national statistics, only 66 percent of white women know that heart disease is their number-one health threat. Only 43 percent of African American women and 44 percent of Hispanic women know this information." (Steinbaum, 2013 p.36)

When I asked Hanna about health concerns she said, "I don't have any real concerns that I would have a heart attack even as stressful as things are. I don't smoke, I don't have diabetes, or high blood pressure, I just need to exercise a bit more and lose a few pounds. Honestly I worry about cancer more than a heart attack." Hanna like many women only considered the major factors she had been familiar with. She did not consider how stress, has compounded her risks especially given her sedentary lifestyle, her weight gain and her over indulgence of alcohol.

Jill, also seemed unaware of how stress was impacting her health. While she admitted to putting on a few pounds she seemed to brush the idea aside and was not concerned. "Even though I think I should get to the gym a bit more, generally, I feel like I am in decent shape. Just need to find a way to slow down a bit." While Jill may be at less risk than others, if chronic stress, poor eating habits and lack of exercise persist, her risk of heart disease will increase over time, especially as she approaches menopause.

As for me, I am probably at greater risk of heart disease than any of the women I interviewed, including Kathy, who has significant risk given her family history. I am overweight, have poor eating habits, do not exercise regularly, am menopausal and am suffering from chronic stress. The difference

for me is that I now know and understand and recognize the risks. I understand the importance of making changes to my lifestyle if I want to remain healthy and reduce my risk of heart disease.

Once women know and can appreciate the risks they can begin to embark on a process of prevention. However, women need to be able to recognize the signs when they are in trouble or may be having a heart attack. Getting help quickly can help save their lives. When heart attacks do occur, many women ignore the signs or don't even recognize them since they often experience different symptoms than those more commonly known in men. "Both sexes can experience the classic heart-attack symptom of chest pain, but women instead can feel discomfort or pain in the neck, jaw, shoulder or right arm. They may feel unusually tired, short of breath, dizzy, lightheaded or nauseated and may vomit or sweat heavily." (Noonan, 2016)

It was not too long ago that I experienced much of the same symptoms I just described. I had been at work one afternoon, sifting through a pile of catalogs on the floor of my office. Quite suddenly, I broke out into a cold sweat, I was out of breath and became very light headed. All of this was happening while I was just sitting on the floor. It was at that point I started to really worry that I may be at risk of having a heart attack. On the way home from work I stopped to buy a bottle of aspirin since I heard somewhere that it can be of help to people about to have an attack. I didn't have the heaviness on my chest that I had often heard about which often accompanies symptoms so I told myself that I was not in any imminent danger but I knew I needed to get to the doctor within the next few days. I should have gone immediately but did get to the doctor within the week. I was lucky. My EKG came out OK, and my blood pressure was normal. However, it certainly helped me to finally recognize that I needed to make some dramatic changes in my life.

A New Attitude

"With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come."

— William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

It may be helpful for many of our New York women to take a lesson from our ladies in San Francisco. Adoption of some west coast lifestyle practices and attitudes could help achieve better work-life balance. Our New York women should strive to make sure the work they do is satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful. It's important for executive women between the ages of 45-55 in New York to remember that having a life is as important as making a living.

New York's executive women also need to take steps to eliminate stress in their lives and make their health and well-being a priority. It can start with just some basic organization and a realization that not everything is going to be done in a day. For example, by focusing on 3 major tasks or projects each day and setting realistic goals and limits and relieves stress and fuels positivity through accomplishment.

Also, taking 30 minutes each day in meditation, prayer, or thought, to recognize and appreciate all that is good and positive in life will help relieve stress. I recently picked up a book called *Meditations For Women Who Do Too Much*, by Anne Wilson Schaef. The book provides inspirational quotes to help women relax, unwind, and appreciate life.

Another tip includes making conscious changes on how we speak, and the language we use. For example, using positive words more often throughout the day, like “awesome,” “fabulous,” and even “yes” rather than “OK,” can help transform the attitudes of these women and those around them.

Finally, it’s important to make a point to smile throughout the day and find time to laugh. “Laughter protects the heart. Laughter improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect you against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems.” (“Laughter”, n.d.)

You Are What You Eat (and drink)

The first step in preventing heart disease starts with what you eat. Exercise alone does not a healthy heart make. Its inputs and outputs. Putting too much food, or the wrong food into the body cannot be offset through exercise alone. “An average woman needs to eat about 2000 calories per day to maintain, and 1500 calories to lose one pound of weight per week.” (“How Many Calories,” 2016.) However, this depends on numerous factors, including age, height, current weight, activity levels, metabolic health, and several others. It may come as a surprise to some that only 80 calories are burned with every mile walked. One piece of chocolate cake can be more than 350 calories so it would take at least a 4 mile walk to get back to square one.

When we interviewed our women in New York, several mentioned that they aren’t great about preparing regular meals, that they can’t find good food on the road, or they just eat out of stress. Well recognizing that will happen is the first step. It makes sense for women to always have a selection of healthy snacks on hand, including fruits, nuts, or low fat cheese. These high protein items can be very satisfying, and give a boost of energy when needed.

Women also need to be careful not to overindulge in alcohol. Not only is it not good for your heart, but menopausal women are also more sensitive to its effects, making hot flashes and night sweats worse. However, the good news is that research has shown that one glass of red wine a day has its benefits and can improve cholesterol levels.

Finally, it’s important for women to drink at least 8 glasses of water each day. “Proper hydration is not only good for your brain, your mood, and your body weight, but it’s also essential for your heart. Your heart is constantly working, pumping about 2,000 gallons of blood a day. By staying hydrated – i.e. drinking more water than you are losing – you are helping your heart do its job. A hydrated heart is able to pump blood more easily, allowing the muscles in your body to work even better.” (“Importance of Hydration,” 2014.)

The 10-1 Rule

One approach to eating healthier and avoiding yo-yo diets would be to incorporate a plan that includes my version of a “10-1 Rule.” It starts by having women make a list of the healthy foods they really like. For every 10 healthy foods on the list they would give themselves permission to include one not so healthy food that they absolutely love and just can’t live without. The healthy food list should have lots of heart healthy items including fruits, vegetables, beans, whole grains, low fat dairy, nuts, lean meats, fish, and protein. They shouldn’t include items they really don’t enjoy and it’s not necessary to include every healthy food they can think of. For example, they may decide to choose between

green beans and asparagus, or oatmeal and bran flakes. Women should be sure to avoid foods that contain saturated fats, trans fats, fried foods, and those high in cholesterol, sodium, and added sugar. They also may want to be mindful of good foods that help to manage menopause symptoms such as soy-based foods which contain high levels of phytoestrogens and can help reduce hot flashes. (Wolfson, 2015)

Women then need to take time to shop for the healthy items on their list and make sure their refrigerators are fully stocked. They also need to be sure to have easy access to these foods or healthy snacks during work or travel. The final step is to plan what they will eat each day and throughout the week, being mindful of calorie intake. They can plan to enjoy one of their not so healthy treats only if 10 other healthy foods are consumed. The goal is to not to feel deprived but to create a balanced diet, and actually enjoy eating healthy. It's still possible to indulge on a slice of Pizza on a Friday night, especially if eating healthy becomes part of a routine.

As we mentioned before, tracking progress is essential. Many follow Weight Watcher plans but there also many other tools, apps and other free calorie counters that can be easily accessed and loaded on to smart phones. "MyFitnessPal" is one of the most popular calorie counters in 2017. It tracks weight and calculates a recommended daily calorie intake. It also contains a well-designed food diary and an exercise log. "FatSecret" is another a free calorie counter that tracks calorie intake as well as breakdown of carbs, protein and fat by day and by month.

Get Moving

Lack of activity destroys the good condition of every human being, while movement and methodical physical exercise save it and preserve it." – Plato

Incorporating regular exercise is one's routine is one of the most effective ways to combat heart disease. It can help lower blood pressure, lessen the risk of developing diabetes, and help to maintain health body weight. "One of the key benefits of exercise is that it helps to control or modify many of the risk factors for heart disease," says Dr. Kerry J. Stewart, Professor of Medicine, Division of Cardiology, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. "Smoking is another big factor for heart disease, and if you exercise regularly you're unlikely to take on a bad habit like smoking, or quit if you already are a smoker." (Day, 2016.) There are many benefits to exercise that are linked throughout the body. Exercise helps improve the muscles' ability to pull oxygen out of the blood, reducing the need for the heart to pump more blood to the muscles. It also reduces stress hormones, and it can work as a beta blocker to slow the heart rate and lower blood pressure. It helps increase high-density lipoprotein (HDL) or "good" cholesterol and helps control triglycerides. Studies have shown that people who exercise regularly are less likely to suffer a sudden heart attack or other life-threatening cardiac event. (Day, 2016.)

So, what type, and how much exercise is necessary to maintain good overall cardiovascular health? The American Heart Association recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity at least 5 days per week for a total of 150 minutes; or at least 25 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity at least 3 days per week for a total of 75 minutes; or a combination of moderate-and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity. (Heart.org, n.d.) This can include activities such as jogging, biking, stair climbing or swimming. While regular cardio activity is certainly a benefit to both men and women of all

ages, there are direct and indirect physical benefits specific to women between the ages of 45-55. For example, “cardio exercises burn a good amount of calories, helping to prevent weight gain — which many women experience during menopause.” (Scott, 2014.) As we already have discussed previously, maintaining healthy weight limits the risks of heart disease.

In addition to regular cardio exercise, it is also recommended to incorporate moderate weightlifting at least 2 days per week which helps to strengthen and tone muscles. “This is particularly important for women going through menopause because it helps slow the normal bone loss that can eventually lead to brittle bones (osteoporosis), according to the National Institutes of Health. Strength training can also help preserve lean muscle, which often starts to dissipate in middle age.” (Scott, 2014.)

Making it Stick

Many women start out with great intentions, but having an exercise routine that they can stick to is usually half the battle. It is important for women to set aside specific time each day for exercise and make it a priority, preferably in the mornings. “The longer you wait in the day to work out, the more excuses you can find to put it off,” says Carol Espel, national director of group fitness at Equinox Fitness Clubs. “ (Sklar, 2008.) Also, working out in the morning helps boost metabolism that can help jump start the day both from a mind and body perspective.

What other strategies or practices can women implement to ensure that they stay committed to a regular exercise routine or get to the gym? Many experts often recommend working out with a friend or in groups. Working out with friends can be fun and social, but more importantly, scheduling time which involves others, helps women stay focused and committed. Mike Monroe, program director of PUSH.tv in New York City suggests a slightly different twist on this buddy system. He suggests getting a fitness “non” buddy, someone who is not necessarily that close to you, but perhaps a friend of a friend or a colleague. “If it's a person with whom you are friendly but aren't all that close with socially, you're probably going to feel more of an obligation to get to your workout appointments on a regular basis.” (Sklar, 2008.)

One of the best ways to stay on track and make an exercise program stick is to again monitor progress. It can be a simple chart, or an app, a Fitbit, or if jogging or cycling a heart rate meter or speedometer. What every executive woman needs to continue to remember is that it is critical to set goals and monitor progress if they are going to achieve their goals. “There are many ways to chart your exercise progress. Three of the most common are target heart rate for aerobic exercise, number of repetitions for weight training, and fat vs. muscle body composition.” (Day, 2016.) For an exercise program to truly take hold and for women to not get discouraged, it's important to start out slow, and not overdue it in the beginning. Its best to accelerate programs overtime.

Many women end up abandoning their exercise routines because unexpected travel or work and family obligations conflict with their scheduled workout routine. While time constraints may sometimes prevent them from getting to the gym or working out a full 30 minutes, there are other methods that can be just as effective if not more so, in less time. “If you can't get to the gym for as long as you'd like, interval training — bursts of intensity followed by a brief recovery period — gets results that are often just as good (if not better) than longer, slower-paced workouts. A study from Laval University in Quebec found that subjects who practiced interval training lost significantly more body fat

than those who went slow and steady. "Intervals burn more calories after a workout because your body takes longer to return to its previous resting state," says Joe Dowdell, owner of Peak Performance in New York City." (Sklar, 2008.)

Is it Really Exercise?

Regular exercise is without a doubt one of the most important things executive women can do to prevent heart disease. However, the most common complaint I've heard from executive working women is that finding the time to fit in a daily exercise routine is difficult. The thought of trying to find another hour in an already jam packed day to schedule regular exercise seems to be overwhelming. To many, it seems like an all or nothing proposition. If they can't find an hour in the morning before or after work to get to the gym, they give up. However, what many women do not seem to realize is that 30 minutes or even less spread throughout the day is better than nothing. They need to think of exercise not as exercise, but as activity.

The most important thing is to move from a sedentary lifestyle to one that integrates healthy living and activity into everyday life. It can be as simple as walking the dog, climbing stairs instead of taking the elevator, or getting off one subway stop earlier and walking. Just getting outdoors has tremendous benefits, and women who literally sit in meetings, on planes, or behind a desk everyday need to think creatively about how they incorporate activity in their daily lives. It doesn't have to be hard. One of the greatest inventions was the Fitbit. This helps women to keep track of their activity and monitor that they are getting in at least the recommended 10,000 steps each day, no matter what form it comes in.

Finally, yoga and other relaxation exercises can help strengthen muscles and help reduce stress. Its low impact and easy on the body. Also, deep-breathing and meditation can help women deal with the symptoms that often accompany menopause. "There's also some evidence that insomnia, a common menopause symptom, can be relieved through yoga and meditation, according to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). (Scott, 2014.)

Office Culture – Doing Business Differently

Changing behavior and developing a culture that promotes a healthy lifestyle, especially in the office can be a paradigm shift for many businesses. Many companies in 2017 are implementing creative ideas and policy that help promote healthy living not only for their top executives but their employees at large. Women executives between the ages of 45-55 need to think creatively about how they can modify what they do each day to help improve health and well-being both at home and in the office. Here are 10 ideas that they might want to consider:

- 1) Walking Meetings – Get outdoors, take a breath, and take those one on one meetings outside. A walk around the block can help stimulate both the mind and body.
- 2) Get a Makeover – Jump start a healthy routine. Go to a day or weekend spa focused on overall health and well-being and start on Monday with a fresh attitude.

- 3) Stand up Desks – A convertible standing desk can help posture, strengthen muscles, and increase blood flow. Heart rates beat slower when sitting.
- 4) Skip the Email – Instead of sending an email to a colleague or employee in the same building, deliver the message in person. It's an excuse to take a walk and get the body moving and the blood flowing. It also provides an opportunity to connect personally with the staff.
- 5) Healthy Food – Bring in healthy lunches and breakfasts for working meetings, skip the cakes and pastries. Large businesses should focus on healthy choices in their own cafeterias.
- 6) Travel – Use time spent in airports to walk rather than sit waiting for planes. Take advantage of delays!
- 7) Create a healthy culture across the entire company – Have healthy baking contests, invite motivational speakers into the office. Engage employees on creative ideas that they think will help. Make them part of the solution. Patagonia is an example of a company whose brand and company is about nature, the environment, and the outdoors. This culture is reflected through the entire company.
- 8) Rethink the team meeting – Rather than meet over lunch, spend the afternoon outdoors, even in the winter. Go ice skating or for a long walk in Central Park. You don't need to wait for the annual summer picnic.
- 9) Quality vs. Quantity – Recognize productivity over long hours. Make work life balance a priority.
- 10) Develop strategies to manage stress – Learn to say no, get enough sleep, do mundane and difficult tasks first, do one thing at a time, get rid of clutter, turn off your phone after 9:00 PM (Schwantes, 2016.)

Corporate Health & Wellness Programs

A healthy diet and regular exercise are two of the most impactful ways to prevent heart disease. Therefore, anything that businesses can do to support women and ensure that they are incorporating these healthy practices into their daily lives will have tremendous benefit to both their employees and their businesses.

Health and wellness programs might include:

- Having a dietician or Weight Watchers come to the office weekly
- Providing Gym memberships
- Hosting Mind-Body Workshops

While structured programs can help initiate and provide ongoing motivation, even smaller informal practices can make a difference. Encouraging women to get out of the office and take walks or even having walking meetings is a way to make sure women are more active. "Just 40 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise three to four times a week was also found to be sufficient for most people. Even brisk walking will do." ("New Diet", 2014)

Mandatory Health screening

As a preventive measure, businesses should be required to do once a year mandatory physicals at all companies for all employees over 40 years old. While most employees have health benefits, many

women cite being “too busy” to get to the doctor every year. This was confirmed in an earlier interview with Jill, the 53- year-old insurance executive, from Connecticut. She admitted she had been “neglectful” with her health and was long overdue for a physical as well as other routine check-ups.

Physicals can easily be done in the office, on company time, and can take less than an hour. They can detect things like high blood pressure, heart arrhythmia, high cholesterol etc. and can alert women to issues they might not be aware of. Results of physicals would still be held in confidence. However, employers would receive cumulative or overall ratings of their employee’s health status and recommendations on health and wellness programs that should be implemented. Health insurance benefits providers would coordinate and conduct the physicals but receive additional subsidies from the government to help cover costs.

The cost benefit of early detection of health problems would be recognized by both the health providers and the employers. “Large corporations that provide health coverage spend approximately \$11,716 per employee each year. The American Heart Association estimates that 17% of the U.S. Health spending is directed to heart diseases.” (“Biggest Health Cost,” 2015.) This does not even include the costs associated with absenteeism or even lack of performance when employees are on the job but not feeling well. Finally, employers could also be incentivized to follow through with health and wellness programs through tax breaks from the state and the federal government.

It’s Lonely at the Top - Professional Coaching/Education & Training

Executive women especially between the ages of 45-55, could benefit through ongoing external coaching. Those women in executive roles often have no one to turn to for advice or support with some of the challenges they face both at home and at work. Professional coaching can help address things like, home and work stress, time management issues, and employee/co-worker/business partnership relationships. They can also help women identify and address bad work and lifestyle habits that might be tapping resources and contributing to additional stress. Coaches can help women regain a new sense of confidence, help them to look at themselves in a more objective way, and focus on taking care of themselves so that they can be more effective leaders. Angie O’Donnell, cofounder of Wellesley’s 3D Leadership Group, an executive coaching firm, says, “Male clients are usually concerned solely with skill-building while women focus on both that and work-life integration. What we find is they’re trying to do all of those roles, including caregiving. They say: ‘I need someone to help me figure some of this out. I am overwhelmed and in overdrive all the time.’” (Baskin, 2015)

CEO’s need to budget for external coaching and mentorship programs for themselves and their executive level employees. Women, perhaps even more than men, will appreciate this type of support. Even joining a regular networking or “support” group can help. “Sometimes, though, it can be tough — and politically unwise — to unburden oneself around workplace colleagues. Anticipating this, leadership coach Elaine Crowley oversees ExecConnect, a new group of roughly 25 female vice presidents and above who belong to the Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association. The group meets at restaurants throughout Boston each month to discuss common career pressures, from communicating with colleagues to arranging child care.” (Baskin, 2015)

In 2017, Kathy has successfully grown her coaching business working with millennials and women of all ages to provide them with insight and the tools they need which she learned through her own experiences. I was surprised to learn that Kathy also has a coach of her own. “You never stop learning,” she says.

Life’s Short - Encourage Work/Life Balance

All too often women at the executive level work long hours and do not take allocated vacation time. While it differs by state, government and labor boards will monitor PTO time for lower level exempt and non-exempt employees, but the same does not typically occur at the executive level. All businesses with more than 10 employees should encourage mandatory usage of allocated vacation/PTO time and should be subject to government compliance even at the executive level. If this is mandated businesses and women can plan more appropriately for how manage their time off. Taking time will allow women to reenergize and can help relieve stress.

Employers should also encourage their executives to “un-plug” on the weekends. French companies were just recently required to guarantee their employees the “right to disconnect” from their email and cell-phones to encourage better work life balance. “On 1 January, an employment law will enter into force that obliges organizations with more than 50 workers to start negotiations to define the rights of employees to ignore their smartphones.” (The Guardian, 2016)

On the other hand, the ability to connect outside of the office can offer added flexibility, especially for those executive women who might also choose to work remotely. Even one day a week working remotely can help to reduce stress. Studies have also shown that commuting, especially those living in the New York area can have a negative impact on health especially for women. “The American Journal of Preventive Medicine found that the 10-mile one-way drives were also associated with higher cholesterol levels among commuters. Scary stuff since cholesterol is a warning sign for heart disease.” (Kylstra, 2014)

Also, encouraging a flexible working schedule for executive women who are balancing the responsibilities of caregiver, can provide much needed time for women to address family obligations, and relieve stress. ‘Being able to work from home—in the evening after children are put to bed, or during their sick days or snow days, and at least some of the time on weekends—can be the key, for mothers, to carrying your full load versus letting a team down at crucial moments. State-of-the-art videoconferencing facilities can dramatically reduce the need for long business trips. These technologies are making inroads, and allowing easier integration of work and family life. According to the Women’s Business Center, 61 percent of women business owners use technology to “integrate the responsibilities of work and home”; 44 percent use technology to allow employees “to work off-site or to have flexible work schedules.” Yet our work culture still remains more office-centered than it needs to be, especially in light of technological advances. (Slaughter, 2012).

Giving Back

Many women ages 45-55 who have already achieved success in their careers are finding that “giving back” helps them to lead more fulfilling lives both in and outside of the office. Employers should encourage volunteerism and the opportunity for executive women to leverage their experience to mentor junior level staff by providing them with the time and resources to make it happen. These women are then able to lead happier, more rewarding balanced lives, which can reduce stress. Mentorship programs allow them to pass on their knowledge and provide an opportunity to reenergize. Participating and organizing fundraising events like the Healthy Heart Walks sponsored by the American Heart Association, are great opportunities to promote physical activity and heart-healthy living while giving back to a worthwhile organization.

These are a few of the many opportunities to help address the needs of executive women age 45-55 and help reduce the risk of heart attack. These are not complicated solutions, but simple tips and easily implemented strategies that can help protect the health of the women that are so important and valuable to organizations. “Still others argue that results attributed to these policies are actually a function of good management overall. What is evident, however, is that many firms that recruit and train well-educated professional women are aware that when a woman leaves because of bad work-family balance, they are losing the money and time they invested in her.” (Slaughter, 2012).

Reflection

Even though executive women between the ages of 45-55 living in the greater New York area know the importance of living a healthy lifestyle, competing demands both personally and professionally are causing them to neglect their health and well-being. “At the times, we are most stressed, many of us make unhealthy choices, such as leaving exercise out of our daily routine, eating unhealthy foods and not getting enough rest. Unfortunately, this ‘superwoman’ syndrome can lead to higher blood pressure, elevated blood sugar, higher cholesterol, cancer and importantly, heart disease, which is the number one killer of women in this country.” (Shirazi, 2014)

While there are still questions as to *how much* stress plays a role in heart disease and may even trigger heart attack, the risks are clear. Obesity, high blood pressure, and hormones are some of the key factors for heart disease. However, when you also consider how many of these health issues are triggered by stress, the argument that stress can lead to heart attack is quite conceivable.

“Going forward, women would do well to frame work-family balance in terms of the broader social and economic issues that affect both women and men. After all, we have a new generation of young men who have been raised by full-time working mothers.” (Slaughter, 2012).

It’s important women between the ages of 45-55 recognize their risks and consider all factors relative to their situation. Sarah, Jill, and Hanna, on the surface all appear to be healthy women, but need to understand that they are at risk regardless. Even under the best of circumstances, menopause is a contributing risk factor for heart disease which every woman in this age range must be mindful of. Adding chronic stress to the picture or a second factor we now know increases the chance of developing heart disease fourfold. Should lack of exercise, weight gain or poor eating habits become part of the mix, a three plus risk factor increases the chance more than tenfold. Kathy’s family history puts her at risk out

of the gate, and given that menopause is unavoidable she needs to be extremely careful to continue to manage the stress in her life and continue on a path of regular exercise and a healthy diet.

When I think back on the 2016 Thanksgiving Day holiday weekend, where I spent the afternoon in the examining room describing to my doctor how I was feeling as an EKG was monitoring my heart, I realize now how lucky I was. I was not having a heart attack, at least not then. However, the risks for me are still significant. While I recognized then that stress was impacting my health on some level, I had no idea the damage it could do directly and indirectly to my heart.

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