



# Why women attorneys are healthier than men

*The law can be an isolating profession – even more of a reason for friends as social safety nets*

BY NANCY NEAL YEEND

How does your firm stack up against national studies? Does it matter? Well, it should matter, not only for each lawyer's individual health, but also for the economic health of the firm. Okay, so let's take a quick run through some basics: women live longer than men, workplace stress negatively impacts a person's health and social interaction prolongs life.

A 2010 Time magazine headline read, "Recipe for Longevity: No Smoking and Lots of Friends." So what is behind these words? Taking a quick look back, insurance actuarial tables have long identified women outlive men. Initially, it was assumed at the turn of the century that it was because women typically stayed at home, and men worked in hazardous jobs. As more women began entering the workforce, the numbers did not appreciably change. By the 1970's women were still outliving men, so the medical community began looking into what might account for the difference in life expectancy.

## Staying on top of your game

Work often generates stress, and stress over time has a negative impact on a person's health. Classic health issues associated with stress include heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some forms of cancer. As an example, law firms generate stress. Attorney stress can be caused by a number of factors: billing pressures, competitive environment, unrealistic client expectations, malpractice prevention concerns, higher documentation requirements, the list appears unending. For new associates there is often the added stress of student debt. So why do women attorneys tend to be healthier than their male counterparts? They have the same pressures and perhaps additional ones, especially if they

take time off to have children. The reason, on average, women have more social networks and emotional support systems – both of which help reduce stress.

"But wait" you say, if you are a male reading this article, "I have friends!" Women, you can take the smirk off your face, because not all of your friends may be helping you. It is not the number of friends, it is the support derived from the friendships and the social interaction. Now be honest guys, how many times when you go out with your buddies do you pour your heart out about something bothering you emotionally? You don't, right? The reason – as a "species," men tend to suppress emotions.

Cultural norms, gender and genetics all impact health. Gender characteristics, such as those associated with ignoring or suppressing emotions, exhibiting a self-reliant personality, and participating in risky behavior, may be harmful to a person's health.<sup>1</sup> Most cultures encourage males to model self-reliance and to take risks. Male attorneys are more likely than women attorneys to internalize their stress, which in turn leads to exhaustion, and ultimately impacts their personal relationships. These characteristics, coupled with fewer social connections not only can impact health but also longevity.

Researchers measure masculinity using the Male Role Norms Inventory, MRIN. Men with a high index number are more likely to suppress their emotions. Suppressing emotions keeps higher levels of stress hormones (catecholamines and glucocorticoids) in the body, and over time this causes physical problems and may even be associated with dementia and hastening the aging process.<sup>2</sup> When lawyers present an image of self-reliance, they are less likely to seek help, and the consequence is retention of stress.

Lawyers are often competitive, as well as perfectionists, so if a high-stakes case requires 60, 80 even 100 hours per week for extended periods of time, they will work those hours – even if it means skipping meals, exercise and their family. Risk-taking, especially coupled with a self-reliant personality, re-enforces the invincibility attitude – a dangerous combination for a lawyer's health.

Women, on the other hand, are more likely to seek help from friends, confide how they feel, and share their emotions. These relationships provide a physiological benefit of bringing down the levels of chemicals that have a negative impact on health. Culturally women are not expected to epitomize self-reliance, and are therefore less concerned about appearing weak by asking for help. In addition, because women tend to be more risk averse, they are more likely to focus on preventing problems. Why is that such a significant factor? Being risk averse increases the probability that a person will get regular medical checkups and seek other professional help. It is not a coincidence that major healthcare providers are pushing prevention these days: preventing major medical problems saves them money.

## Significant factors

Researchers at Brigham Young University and the University of North Carolina collected data from nearly 150 studies, involving 300,000 people, and found that individuals with good social connections lived, on average, over seven years longer than those not socially integrated.<sup>3</sup> Because the practice of law can be an isolating profession, male lawyers tend to have fewer social safety nets. For lawyers the stress might first manifest itself as headaches, lower back pain or angry outbursts.



When lawyers have unpleasant emotional feelings, such as from work-related stress, or even during diagnostic medical tests, their heart rate and blood pressure will increase. If they have someone to talk to about what is bothering them, then stress levels decrease. Using the medical example: if a person goes to a doctor for lab tests, accompanied by a friend, signs of stress diminish and levels of oxytocin increase. This chemical, which is a neuropeptide, helps reduce the stress response. Simply put – oxytocin makes people more social. It is interesting to note that both physical and emotional pain are registered in the same part of the brain: the anterior cingulate cortex.

This may help explain why a person working out and who experiences muscle pain will also experience higher levels of stress.

Some scientists have even experimented and observed that people who have more social connections are less likely to get sick when intentionally exposed to a cold virus. Their conclusion: positive social interaction boosts a person's immune system. Cancer researchers noted that increased involvement with friends and family has decreased the risk of dying in younger breast cancer patients.<sup>4</sup> Another 2012 study found similar results for those having heart surgery.

Over a nine-year period, the County of Alameda studied the “social network index” of nearly 5000 adults. Having a significant number of work, religious or other affiliations, along with many friends, extended families, and marriage produced a high index number. Those with a lower social index were twice as likely to die during the study period than those with a high index. One writer quipped that “*Hermits will remain bad bets for life insurance underwriters.*”

### Changing the odds

There are three simple, and yet very important steps that lawyers can take to improve their health and increase the odds of longevity: invest in social connections, lower the self-reliance facade and reduce risks. As stated earlier, it is not the number of social connections; it is the quality of those interactions.

Social connections are no good if a lawyer holds back their emotions. The often-cited male characteristic of self-reliance has its place, but not when it keeps a person from getting rid of dangerous, stress-caused emotions. There has to be a willingness to share concerns and to stop suppressing emotions. Letting a spouse, other family member or friend know the extent of frustration, anger or other emotion, will go a long way to reduce stress and lower toxic hormones.

Lawyers listen to the problems of others, but how often do lawyers confide in someone? Having another person who will truly listen to your emotional outpouring is therapeutic. Masculinity may be fine for the athletic field, but it can be hazardous to a person's health in the office.

It must be remembered that social networks are not the only significant factor in reducing the long-term effects of stress. Lawyers must continue to exercise, get rest and avoid excessive use of alcohol and other drugs. Substance abuse is often one of the first signs of significant stress in a lawyer's life. In the July 2015 issue of the ABA Journal, the State Bar of California was identified as one of a handful of organizations dealing with the consequences of stress on attorney performance.

To be fair there are some interesting caveats: just being married is not enough to fulfill the social network requirement. According to one British study, although marriage offers “*support and companionship*,” a large percentage of married men have few social connections. This seems to be especially true for men over 55.<sup>5</sup> One contributing factor is that men hold on to social connections made when they were younger, so as people move away or die, their social circle shrinks.

The practice of law requires long hours, so maintaining social connections is more difficult. Women, however, are more likely to continue to make close friendships, even as they get older. It should be noted that although it is easier for women to have and maintain social connections, men actually benefit more from social relationships. The primary reason – women are more likely than men to take on the

added responsibility for the fate of other women in their social network.

In short: self-reliance can help anyone; however, when carried to an extreme, it can be hazardous to a person's health. Reducing risk happens when prevention becomes the watchword. Risk-taking may help in some situations, but when it means that regular physicals or health screenings are put off, the consequences can be dire. On the advice of psychologists, some doctors are working with male patients and linking proactive health to being in charge of your life. These physicians are tapping into the predominately male self-reliant image. They are also using words that relate to sports, like being a member of the “*team.*”

A few suggestions may help: become socially involved; re-connect with old friends – it's easier these days with the Internet; consider joining a support group if you have suffered a serious health problem; or do something to stimulate the right side of your brain – like painting or singing. The practice of law requires extensive use of the left side of your brain. Let it rest and have some fun.

### Conclusion

As scientific studies have shown, lack of social connections is a significant health risk factor – as important as lack of exercise, or increased drinking and smoking. The legal profession has a low tolerance for failure, which is just one example, yet significant factor of this stress-generating profession. It is a proven fact that people with strong social connections live longer. Research has shown that individuals who are not afraid to appear vulnerable are more likely to ask for help. Those who avoid taking risks also tend to live longer. These three factors, social connections, willingness to ask for help and avoiding risks, are key to living longer. Stress is reduced and oxytocin is increased with positive health consequences. When stress is high, especially for a prolonged period of time, there is a negative impact on a person's health. When lawyers have a solid network of friends, do not suppress their emotions,



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and focus on prevention rather than risk-taking, they are more likely to live longer and to enjoy more productive lives. As the Beatles' song says, "I get by with a little help from my friends."

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bridget Murray-Law, *Why Men Die Earlier*, American Psychological Association, Vol. 42, No. 6, June 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> Michelle Diamant, *Friends Make You Smarter*, AARP Bulletin, November 21, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Sheldon Cohen, *Social Relationships and Health*, American Psychologist, November 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> Ingrid Wickelgren, *The Importance of Being Social*, Scientific American, April 2012.
- <sup>5</sup> John Bingham, *2.5 Million Men Have No Close Friends*, The Telegraph, November 14, 2015.