

## “WHAT HAT SHOULD I WEAR?”

“Multiple Roles, Quality of Life and Stress”

Women transitioning through the menopause and mid-life may find themselves dealing with new challenges that can lead to new stressors. Stress, the physical and emotional response to changes in our environment and life, can be beneficial by adding excitement to life and motivating us to grow and develop new skills. However, too much stress can be detrimental to both emotional and physical health and quality of life. Symptoms of stress may include irritability, nervousness or anxiety, feeling sad for a prolonged period of time, anger, and fatigue.

Taking on multiple roles is becoming more common in modern life. As life spans continue to increase, mid-life women more often than men are assuming the role of caretaker for aging parents and even grandchildren, along with their own children. Women may also have employment responsibilities in addition to their role as wife, friend, daughter, mother, caregiver and more. Just think about how many roles you fill.

Research has shown that many roles, such as being employed, married, or having children in the household, can be fulfilling, ever rewarding and have a positive effect on stress levels. Moreover, certain situations and combinations of roles and responsibilities can be more stressful than others and can have a negative effect on one’s quality of life.

In general it is widely accepted that women’s multiple roles increase the probability that time demands and conflicts will build to a point where women may find themselves overwhelmed and overly stressed. Some other factors that can increase stress as researched by SWAN are lower socioeconomic status, menopause, ethnicity, and distressing life events.

Increased stress, along with mid-life changes associated with menopause can heighten the risk for both physical and mental health problems. The SWAN Study has found that depression, which can be exacerbated by high stress, can lead to the neglect of one’s physical well-being, especially in regard to personal health. It is important to remember to make the time for self-care, to ensure one’s own health care will not be ignored.



Many women in mid-life are taking on the added responsibility of the role of caregiver in addition to mother, parent, spouse and employee and it is important to understand how stress levels affect mid-life women during the menopause transition. The SWAN Study has done significant research in the area of stress and how it affects women and quality of life during the menopause transition. SWAN participants cope with stress in various ways from eating healthy and exercising to herbal teas and prayer. Some tips to help prevent and manage stress are provided below.

#### Stress Prevention:

1. Exercise – Just 30 minutes every other day can help prevent and relieve stress. There are many different exercises that can be done; pick the one(s) that works best for you.
2. Eat and sleep well – Balanced nutrition and the right amount of sleep are essential for the body to function and manage stress properly.
3. Develop a positive attitude – trying to think positively in situations can help avoid feeling stressed when things don't go exactly as planned.

#### Stress Management and Coping:

1. Ask for help – when feeling overwhelmed having some assistance can help ease stress.
2. Relax with stretching and exercising – this can help take your mind off what is causing you stress.
3. Relax with deep breathing – slow deep breaths counteract the shallow fast paced breathing associated with stress.
4. If you experience symptoms of depression (e.g., sad mood, loss of interest, decreased energy, changes in eating or sleeping) that last for more than one month and interfere with your ability to get things done, consult your primary care physician for further assessment and possible treatment.

**For more information about stress visit the National Institute of Health website**

1. [http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2007/January/docs/01features\\_01.htm](http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2007/January/docs/01features_01.htm)
2. <http://www.nih.gov/news/WordonHealth/oct2000/story01.htm#TOP>
3. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html> (some links available in Spanish)

#### **Some articles from SWAN about quality of life and stress**

1. Health-Related Quality of Life in a Multiethnic Sample of Middle-Aged Women. *Medical Care*, Volume 41, Number 11, pages 1262-1276 (2003).
2. Quality of life in diverse groups of midlife women: Assessing the influence of menopause, health status and psychosocial and demographic factors,” *Quality of Life Research* Vol 13 (2004): 933-946.
3. Racial/Ethnic Differences in the Prevalence of Depressive Symptoms Among Middle-Aged Women: The Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN),” *American Journal of Public Health* Vol 94 No. 8 (2004): 1378-1385.
4. Depressive Symptom Burden as a Barrier to Screening for Breast and Cervical Cancers,” *Journal of Women's Health* Vol 13 No. 6 (2004): 731-738.

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**<http://www.swanstudy.org>**