Mother, Daughter, Spouse, Employee, Caretaker: Women’s Multiple Roles and Health

As women, we take on many duties and roles---as spouses or partners, mothers, daughters, employees, and caregivers. Some women consider these roles fulfilling and rewarding while others feel pressured or stressed from these multiple demands. Many of us see our roles as having both stressful and rewarding aspects. Mid-life is a time in women’s lives when roles change. For example, children may be growing up and leaving home, or elderly parents may require care.

At each study visit, you are asked to rate the stresses and rewards related to your roles as spouse, mother, daughter, employee or caregiver. We ask you to rate whether each role is not at all stressful (rewarding), or extremely stressful (not rewarding), using a numbered scale. This newsletter highlights some ways that SWAN researchers have used the information that you provide to examine whether the rewards and stresses women associate with their many roles affect their health.

Stresses, Rewards and Mental Health
SWAN investigator Teresa Lanza di Scalea, M.D., PhD., studied whether women’s ratings of role rewards and stresses are associated with measures of mental health. She found that perceived rewards can buffer, or reduce, the adverse effects of stress in some roles. High rewards from marriage buffered the impact of marital stress on depression, and high rewards from motherhood buffered the effects of maternal stress on depression and on the ability to interact socially. Among Chinese and Hispanic women, high stress in their roles had less negative effects on their ability to function socially than it had among Caucasian women. African American mothers were less likely to report symptoms of depression compared with Caucasian mothers.

Stresses, Rewards and Heart Health
SWAN investigator Imke Janssen, PhD, examined whether women’s ratings of stresses and rewards are associated with early signs of heart disease. She used data from women at the Pittsburgh and Chicago SWAN sites who participated in the SWAN Heart Study. SWAN Heart is a sub-study of SWAN that measured markers of atherosclerosis during the menopause transition. Atherosclerosis, (the build-up of
deposits of fat, cholesterol, calcium and other substances in the blood vessels) is the major underlying cause of heart attacks and stroke. Dr. Janssen found that the number of roles that women reported taking on and stress from these roles were not related to a measure of calcium build-up in the blood vessels. However, rewards from these roles were protective –women who viewed their roles as rewarding were less likely to have calcium build-up in their blood vessels. This protective effect was even stronger among African American women.

**Summary**
Understanding how the stresses and rewards of daily life influence our health is important. These early findings from SWAN study suggest that emphasis on the rewarding aspects of our roles may be beneficial. Cultural factors may influence the availability of resources for coping with stress. Some groups may be more likely to emphasize the positive aspects of their roles in the home and at work. The information you provide at annual follow-ups will allow us to increase our understanding of how cultural differences shape women’s experiences, and how these experiences affect physical and mental health.

**Ways of Coping with Stress**
SWAN participants cope with stress in various ways, from eating a healthy diet and exercising to drinking herbal teas and praying. Some tips to help manage stress are provided below:

1. Ask for help – assistance when you feel overwhelmed 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 rapid 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 coping with stress visit the National Institutes of Health websites below:

SITE SPECIFIC SECTION