

Heart-wrenching **STRESS**

As the pandemic and lockdowns drag on, women continue to take the lion's share of the work – and stress – without taking care of themselves, writes Lauren Libbett.

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The pandemic working-from-home lifestyle may be a godsend for working women practically, but it may be detrimental to our health physically, overloading our bodies, and hearts with toxic stress.

It doesn't take a scientist to tell us that working hard while caring for a family can be stressful, but a new study reveals the true health cost on women's hearts, trying to do both well.

The study, published this month in the Journal of the American Heart Association, revealed that the combined strains of holding down a job, and keeping up with social responsibilities, increases the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) for women.

This twin stress, dubbed in the study as “psychosocial stress” can be lethal, doing more damage to women's hearts than the effects of drinking, smoking, depression, and high cholesterol.

According to the authors of the study, in which the average age of women was 63, “Daily life stressors and family problems may act synergistically with job stress, accelerating the development of coronary heart disease in women, since they usually take more domestic and care-giving responsibilities.”

During the pandemic, these stresses increased exponentially, with women shouldering much of the emotional and physical labour of looking after the family as well as working, and the ripple effect is ongoing.

“Psychosocial stresses are the demands put on you from finance, work and relationships, and can be anything from looking after elderly relatives and diffusing family feuds to work deadlines and organising your children's daily activities,” says Professor Andrew Steptoe, head of the department of behavioural science and health at University College London.

“Focusing on work alone tends to traditionally be in the male domain, which is why these toxic stressors are particularly associated with women, who tend to carry more of the social burden and don't have the luxury often of being able to focus simply on work.”

As busy, multi-tasking caregivers, Regina Giblin, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, worries that women will ignore the physical signs of stress until it is too late.

“Palpitations, headaches, trouble sleeping, comfort eating, sudden weight loss or weight gain, easily getting angry, or feeling numb, are all symptoms of stress,”

Giblin says.

“Stress causes adrenaline to be released in the blood, and for your heart rate and blood pressure to rise. This is the body's normal flight-or-fight response. Chronic stress can also cause inflammation throughout the body, rupturing the plaque inside the arterial walls, generating cells to go fix it, which can then cause a clot, which could lead to a heart attack.”

A 2017 study in The Lancet linked constant stress to higher activity in an area of the brain linked to processing emotions. The study suggested that when you are stressed, your amygdala (which deals with stress) signals to the bone marrow to produce extra white blood cells and this causes the arteries to become inflamed, resulting in CHD.

“In theory, working from home is great for women because you lose the commute, can be closer for the nursery or school run, and you can do little domestic things like load a dishwasher while you're on a work coffee break,” says Christine Armstrong, a British researcher and vlogger on the future of work.

“But recent research from Kent University revealed that the more flexibility we have at work, the harder we tend to work and, post-pandemic, we are now struggling to set boundaries.

“Being a great parent, and being good at your job, was easier when life was separated between work and home, but when they crash into each other, it's much harder and is more stressful.”

Armstrong quotes a recent Women in the Workplace study from business consultancy McKinsey, which polled more than 65,000 employees in the United States, in which 42 per cent of women reported being burnt out often this year, compared to 32 per cent last year.

Work, caregiving and household demands, as well as pandemic anxiety, have clearly left women little to no time to catch their breath during the past 20 months, and the hybrid workplace isn't helping.

“In a household with two flexibly working parents, where they are carefully co-ordinating diaries, it's a fragile house of cards, which can all collapse if there's one change and childcare or work arrangements need to be adjusted,” Armstrong says.

“It generates household stress and, more often than not, it is the woman who takes it on.”

Inevitably, when people are stressed, they adopt unhealthy behaviours, which increase their health risks.

“If you're feeling heart palpitations or anxiety, speak to your doctor about it,” Giblin says. -