

## Relationships stressing you out?

By Anne Bacani  
Special to Canoe

Your boyfriend just dumped you. You hear his half-baked excuses absolving you for the break-up -- "It's not you, it's me." You smile coolly, trying to hide that wave of panic rising from the depths of your belly, travelling to your shoulders and settling into a throbbing ache in the nape of your neck. Relief comes when you begin to fantasize about slashing your new ex's tires. Maybe you'll even sleep with him one last time just to show the jerk what he'll be missing.



There's all sorts of ways you can deal with this kind of stress. You could go on a vacation, take up yoga, stuff your face with cookies and ice cream. Or you could always vent your pain by baring it on stage, which is what Annabel Griffiths, Alison Lawrence and Mary Francis Moore did.

The trio of women wrote, produced and star in *Bittergirl* - a partially biographical play running at The Tim Sims Playhouse. It deals with the relationship stresses --- getting dumped, the desire to exact revenge --- that women encounter every day.

"We make such fools of ourselves on stage," says the 32-year-old Moore. "Our characters have temper tantrums, we get drunk We do all the unmentionable, horrific things we can't do in public."

Nothing is deemed too ludicrous for the 'girls.' One love scene, for example, unfolds with Griffiths' character aggressively demanding her ex-lover to tell her why she wasn't good enough for him. Moore says she loves this scene because it strikes an emotional chord; it's a scenario most of us can relate to because we've rehearsed it over and over again in our heads. She points out it's usually "the relationships that you don't care so much about that you demand (answers to)."

So why is that? The 'girls' - all attractive, well-dressed women - pitch their theories while sipping coffee at a King Street West cafe. Griffiths says that because you ignored all the signposts along the way hinting at a doomed relationship, your feeling of self-disappointment is so raw that you demand justification. Moore jokes at being cursed with "an amazing lack of good judgment." Lawrence suggests it's probably guilt gnawing at our conscience as we feel responsible for the relationship's failure. We lament, Lawrence says, if only we worked harder at it, it may have had a chance of surviving.

Heather McKechnie, a marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Newmarket, shares the same perspective.

"Women are people pleasers. We were raised to nurture. If we let someone down we think it's our fault," says McKechnie.

This sign of over-responsibility causes tremendous stress on women who don't hold men accountable for any screw-ups in the relationship, says Marilyn Belleghem, a 58-year-old marriage and family therapist in Oakville. Women often play hero and assume the job of saving men and fixing them.

Society only adds to the burden of responsibility by supporting the notion women are experts at multi-tasking, Belleghem says. Taking care of her kids, her spouse, her aging parents, plus earning a living are tasks she should be able to handle with minimal fuss. Although our society is thankfully changing its viewpoint on women's roles, "we still have a long way to go," Belleghem says.

Some women claim that despite their busy, multi-tasking lives, maintaining a steady routine can control stress. Thirty-four-year-old mother of two and Kingston private school administrator Nynke Hoedeman says the daily pressures of life --- which include "the morning rush: getting everybody ready for school, out the door, and going to work; the evening rush: dinner, homework, pajamas, bedtime stories" --- are not stressful because she has control over them.



"Everything happens exactly the same way every day," says Hoedeman. She does sometimes wish for a break in the routine, but when the change does come "it throws everything off and we pay for it after."

Although routine may give women control it doesn't decrease stress, McKechnie warns. "I think everybody needs structure. But not the kind of structure where every minute is planned for Rigid routine is not good because it doesn't allow for the fact that every day is different."

McKechnie advises people to plan for the unexpected, such as a change in weather conditions that could delay them in traffic for long hours, because this will definitely throw their planned agenda out of whack. If they're unprepared for the sudden change, this can cost major stress.

But it's a case of different strokes for different folks. Hoedeman says she's rarely ever sad or down, and the only source of stress in her life are things she has no control over.

"What would get me down would be relationship stuff. Financial things. Things I necessarily don't have control over myself," says Hoedeman. "My usual response is not to deal with it. Or to worry about it in the middle of the night."

Hoedeman says she hides her stress from her husband. Consequently, bottling her stress inside sometimes makes her resentful, she says.

"He probably has no idea when I'm feeling stressed out. Probably no one does I don't show stress

to keep things going more smoothly in our relationship."

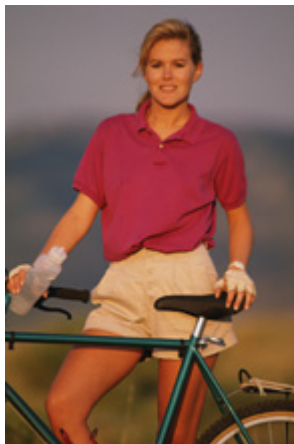
Besides, she says, any kind of stress she's had has been manageable. Her four hours of karate a week, which she started two years ago to tone her body, has helped her not only to become physically fit but also to become more confident and assertive. "There's a great emotional, psychological and spiritual benefit with Karate, through the discipline involved," Hoedeman says.

Therapists acknowledge the value of physical exercise and rank it right after women's need for self-care as a defense against debilitating stress. Exercise directly affects the way a person manages stresses because it boosts energy and self-esteem. When you feel good about yourself and are able to think with a clearer head, you can use stress to your advantage.

Surprisingly enough, experts say that stress can be beneficial to women. McKechnie says there's a misconception stress is bad for you and you need to eliminate it from your life. In fact, stress is part of living and should be used as a catalyst to actively think of solutions to problems instead of fretting about them needlessly. McKechnie adds stress can also compel people to prioritize, to discern which responsibilities they can and can't shoulder.

"Without stress we would be feeling quite bored and stagnant. Stress can be exciting. It's growth inducing. It teaches you to become aware of your limitations. It helps people re-evaluate their values and beliefs," she says.

And what did the Bittergirls do to cope with their relationship stress? They made a pact with each other to stop apologizing and to let go of guilt. Their bad relationships taught them the importance of finding quality time for themselves. They each try to exercise regularly and keep a daily journal. Their keys to a healthy relationship: don't lose your sense of self; know who you are and what you want.



This includes accepting people at face value and avoiding a misguided notion that you can change people to suit your needs and wants. Moore says some women are attracted to the stereotypical bad boy - the drug-poppin', smokin', torn-jean-wearin' dude on a Harley -- because they think their love will be enough to transform these men into ideal boyfriends or spouses. When they can't convert the unconvertable, this leads to problems in the relationship.

"The biker with the heart of gold doesn't really have a heart of gold. And the nice guy is really a nice guy," says Moore. The moral: find someone with whom you're compatible versus someone you need to remake.

**Physical activity is a great stress-reliever, so find the time to exercise. If it's time you lack, give one of these remedies a try:**

- ▶ Walk to work, at work, or home from work.
- ▶ Skip the elevator, take the stairs.
- ▶ Throw the ball with the dog (or race him for it!).
- ▶ Bike or roller-skate with the kids.
- ▶ Get up a little earlier and exercise.
- ▶ Write physical activity into your calendar
- ▶ Walk and talk. Exercising with a friend, a neighbour, or a mate betters your body and your soul.

-- from **A Woman's Guide To A Simpler Life** by Andrea Van Steenhouse (Three Rivers Press, \$19.50)

Once we've accepted responsibility for the direction of our own lives, Belleghem says, we learn how to handle stress capably. Having realistic expectations for ourselves and knowing what power lies within us are our armour against stress.

"We've written, produced and acted in our own play," says Moore. "We've been stressed but it's an empowering stress."

Moore's self-image has grown by leaps and bounds. "I'm strong. I'm capable. If I want something badly enough, I'll make it happen. It's up to me. It's not up to fate, or the universe. It's up to me."

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