

Considerations for Working Women and Stress

- A Review of Allopathic and Ayurvedic Approaches to Treating Adrenal Fatigue



ABSTRACT

As the 21st century progresses, women in the United States work, earn and accomplish far more than they have in previous historical eras. While women reap the rewards of new opportunities, this progress often comes at the cost of their personal well-being. Women tend to experience higher levels of stress than their male counterparts as they are often expected to juggle modern jobs alongside traditional familial roles. As a result of the combination of fiscal and emotional labor, and their non-stop, high-stress lifestyles, this review asserts that women are at greater risk for experiencing a physical condition known as adrenal fatigue.

Adrenal fatigue refers to a health condition that elicits a variety of unpleasant symptoms including: sleep disturbances, body aches, fatigue, anxiety and issues with digestion (Mayo Clinic, 2020). The adrenal glands are responsible for hormone production. Their function in the body is essential as the hormones they produce regulate the body's metabolism, immune system, blood pressure and responses to stress (John Hopkins Medicine). Adrenal fatigue occurs when the adrenal glands function below their appropriate level as a result of intense and consistent stress and anxiety.

As 2020 progresses, companies within the corporate landscape have begun to acknowledge the personal and professional load that women often carry. Women continue to experience “corporate burnout,” or feelings of depletion caused by juggling a high pressure work-life with their responsibilities at home. If companies hope to achieve long-term sustainability within the modern workforce, they must make space for women leadership. This wave of hard working, ambitious women employees require employers who provide empowered programming, engaging training and personalized solutions to problems that arise. If this pattern of corporate burnout continues without any modification to workplace culture or prioritization of personal self-care, job turnover will increase, the longevity of human capital will fall, and the US economy will suffer. Once employers include personal well-being as a core metric to their team's success, all parties involved will thrive.

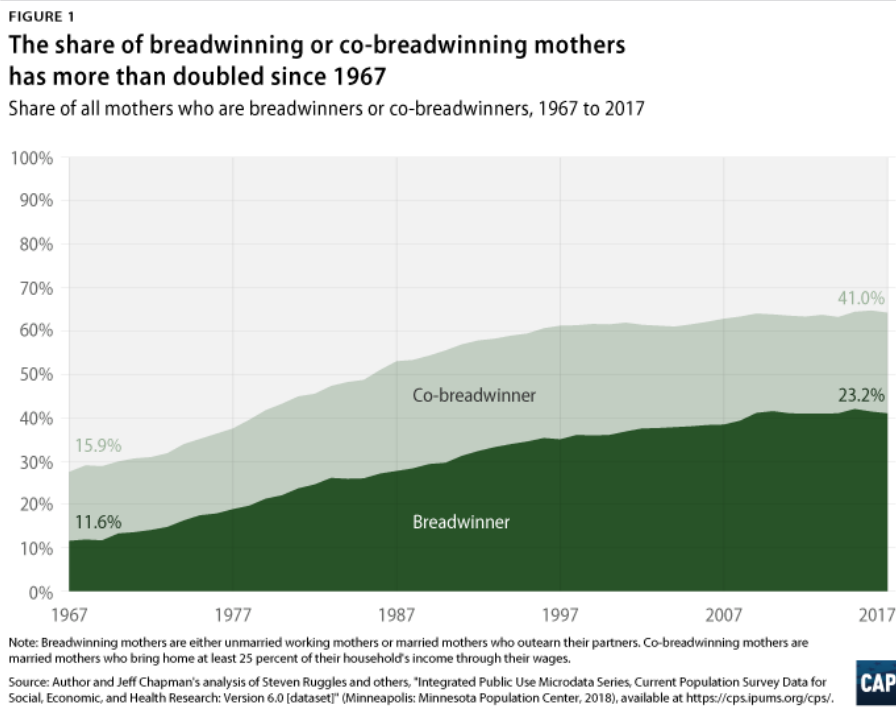
This review will elucidate the effects of stress on working women, investigate the causes of adrenal fatigue and provide a variety of treatment methods, both from an allopathic and Ayurvedic standpoint. When treating this condition, it is important to consider a variety of health perspectives. Western medicine does not classify adrenal fatigue as an accepted medical diagnosis. Similarly, Ayurveda makes no direct reference to adrenal fatigue in its ancient texts dating back 5,000 years. Therefore, modern health and wellness experts can combine training from both perspectives to address this new frontier of physical disease.

INTRODUCTION

During this unprecedented time, women continue to make significant strides up the corporate ladder. Women now claim their seats at the table as CEOs, presidents, board members and other leadership roles. As of 2017, 41% of mothers were the sole or primary breadwinners for their families, earning at least half of their total household income (Figure 1) (Glynn, 2016). While these household roles vary with each family (there are stay-at-home-dads, for example), women most often take on the majority of the home-life responsibilities (Weber-Raley & Smith, 2015).

Women’s professional progress elicits hope for gender equality but at what cost? “In the last 30 years, even as women have made great gains in the workplace, self-reported stress levels have gone up 18 percent,” stated Arianna Huffington (Medium, 2017). This non-stop work culture leaves little room for women to prioritize their health as they live in a state of constant stress and sleep deprivation. In summary, women make short-term gains at the cost of the longevity of their well-being.

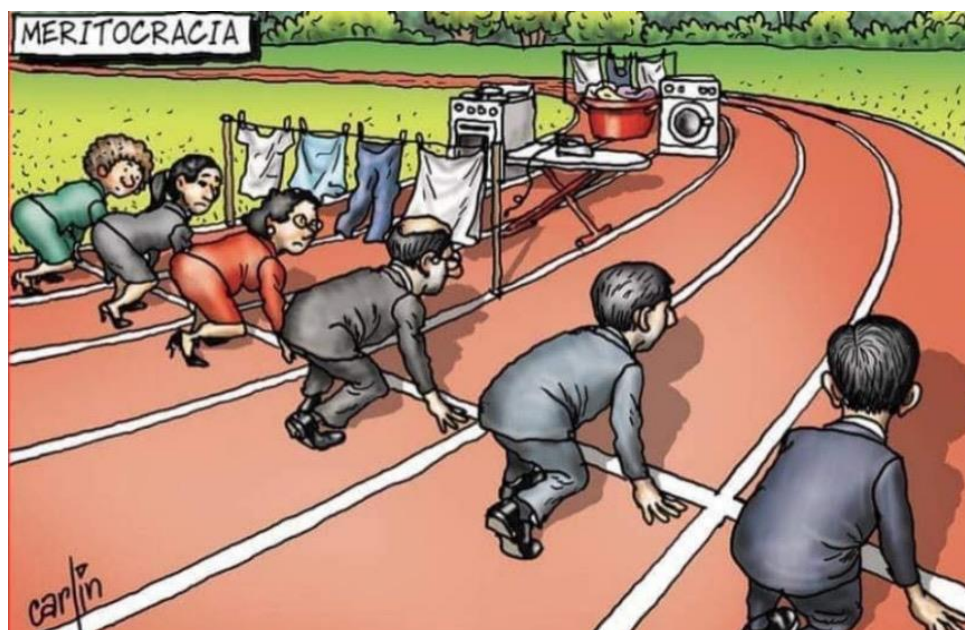
Many Western cultures glorify an “always-on” lifestyle that only two-income families can realistically maintain. In fact, in 1976, 56.3% of married mothers worked for pay compared to the 69.6% in 2017 (Glynn, 2016). This contemporary “rise and grind” mentality causes one of the key contributors to adrenal fatigue: stress.



Stress is the underlying cause of 60% of all human illness and disease. Research shows that stress has a negative impact on teamwork, the ability to focus, decision-making and creative thinking. According to the American Institute of Stress, 80% of workers feel stress on the job, and nearly half express a need for help learning how to manage stress (Workplace, 2020).

The unending workflow brought about by working women's familial and professional responsibilities pushes them to their mental and emotional brink. Ultimately, they are forced to choose between their career, their family and their personal well-being - with the third usually prioritized last. With health de-prioritized, it is no wonder women are twice as likely to experience depression and up to three times more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders than men (Rosch, 2014). A problematic accumulation of stress can be equated to a dripping pipe in one's basement. Although it appears one drop has little to no effect on the home, if left unattended for years, the basement slowly fills with water, thus compromising the foundation of the home. In the body and mind, these initial drops represent the early symptoms of adrenal fatigue. Left unaddressed, minor aches and pains can escalate into a full-blown diagnosable disease that impacts immunity and overall well-being.

Stress costs the nation \$300 billion annually in medical bills and lost productivity. In 2019, the World Health Organization declared burnout an official medical diagnosis. This work-related stress syndrome is characterized by three main symptoms: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Singh, 2011). Stress and burnout continue to reach insurmountable heights and costs businesses their profits and their best people.



ALLOPATHIC PERSPECTIVE ON ADRENAL FATIGUE

Stress is a natural and needed response to any real or perceived trigger, be it physical or emotional. Human's survival instincts allow us to navigate life or death scenarios with tact and precision. Our physical response to stress creates an alertness in the body that prompts the heart to pump more blood into the muscle groups most responsible for fight or flight responses (Welch, 2011).

While our internal stress settings help us navigate dangerous situations, they should not dictate the pace of our day-to-day lives. The average working citizen spends many of their waking hours in this heightened state. According to Claudia Welch, MSOM, one stressful conversation can increase stress hormones for more than 22 hours (Welch, 2011). Imagine the cumulative effect of intense work meetings, passive-aggressive emails, deadline pressures, family responsibilities, our daily commute, and any of the other frequently occurring stressors in our lives.

Those suffering from the effects of non-stop stress are more likely to have an impaired immune system, and therefore, potentially suffer from frequent illness (Yaribeygi, 2017). When stress occurs the body produces two core hormones: adrenaline and cortisol. For the purposes of this research, we will primarily examine the negative effects of cortisol as it stays active in the body for a longer period of time.

The outer portion of the adrenal glands produces cortisol. In excess, healthcare professionals consider cortisol to be "...a risk factor for depression, osteoporosis, weight loss or gain, problems in the cardiovascular system, high blood pressure, and a host of other issues in women's health" (Welch, 2011). Additionally, stress-induced cortisol production promotes breakdown of bones, skin, muscles, and the brain. It can cause accelerated aging, memory loss, increased blood sugar, high cholesterol and heart disease (Welch, 2011).

When enduring the negative effects of stress for long periods of time, the adrenal glands begin to lose their ability to appropriately manage and respond to these feelings. In western medicine this is called "adrenal fatigue" or "adrenal weakness." Per Dr. Marianne Teitelbaum, "you may feel hopeless, like you want to give up, as you no longer have any strength to fight the battle." (Teitelbaum, 2019). For many women, experiencing exhaustion, slowed metabolism, decreased immunity, brain fog, anxiousness, emotional upset, PMS, sleeplessness, issues with weight accumulation, and sugar or salt cravings constitutes an average day (Teitelbaum, 2019; Vitti, 2014). Western medicine classifies these issues as symptoms but not a standalone disease. Therefore, as part of an allopathic healing protocol, an individual usually receives localized treatments to address each symptom instead of addressing the root cause of the issue.

ALLOPATHIC TREATMENT OF ADRENAL FATIGUE

A woman suffering from burnout may exhibit the following symptoms: low energy, weight gain, menstrual irregularities, mood swings, anxiety, constipation and insomnia. She may treat these symptoms as a minor inconvenience and temporarily quell them by drinking coffee, skipping meals, taking birth control or a stool softener for bowel relief. If she seeks out more long-term relief, she may work with a doctor or psychiatrist to manage her mental health and/or create a more regulated diet and exercise plan for physical wellness. However, Western medicine does not offer any direct treatment for adrenal fatigue. Physicians will commonly encourage exercise, vacation or anti-depressant medication as allopathic protocols to reduce stress, and any additional effects of adrenal fatigue.

EXERCISE

Exercise is fantastic for the body and mind. Moving the body promotes a host of benefits including helping to build endurance, release trapped toxins, reduce high blood pressure, clear the mind, and boost endorphins. Additionally, exercise can reduce excess glucose that makes its way into the bloodstream and is a productive stress coping mechanism (Vitti, 2014).

Health organizations like the American Heart Association and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) promote their own exercise recommendations. However, these protocols do not consider the effects of high stress on the body, especially on women. If a woman suffers from adrenal fatigue, she must consider the state of her body and the possible side effects of exercise. Not all exercise is created equal.

If a woman suffers from adrenal fatigue, she should be cautious not to overexert herself with excessive exercise. A high-intensive cardio workout may feel empowering in the moment but this style of exercise may further exacerbate the fight-or-flight response to stress that causes adrenal fatigue. When recovering from adrenal fatigue, any intensive exercise that lasts longer than 20 minutes can cause cortisol levels to rise (Vitti, 2014).

It is important to design a workout routine that eases the effects of adrenal fatigue rather than exacerbates them. A woman suffering from these symptoms can incorporate a mixture of low-intensity cardio and strength training including but not limited to walking, jogging, yoga, and full body workouts with light weights. Giving the body a moment to release stress will put less strain on the adrenal glands and decrease cortisol levels in the blood. This regimen should elicit feelings of energy rather than depletion after a workout. Over time, one can slowly increase duration and intensity but should always aim to use exercise as a tool to heal the body. Vitti recommends that women plan for at least two "rest days" per week for the healthiest long-term effects.

VACATION

Companies will offer paid vacation days as part of their employees' compensation package not out of generosity, but because corporate leadership understands the positive effect of rest on one's well-being, morale and overall productivity. Company leaders aim to keep talented, high-achieving employees; therefore, they incentivize their staff with paid leave.

Based on a study performed by the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), for every ten additional days of paid vacation leave, depression in women lowered by 29%. Per this research:

“Should this association be truly causal, and assuming a uniform effect across all ages in working adult women, the results from this study would suggest that a hypothetical increase in the average number of days of paid vacation leave of 10 days could avoid an estimated 568,442 cases of depression in women each year and lead to a cost savings of \$2.94 billion annually” (Kim, 2019).

The above number nearly matches the annual cost of burnout paid by organizations in the United States.

Vacation may seem like the perfect solution to support stress reduction and adrenal strengthening but many employees find it challenging to disconnect or cannot afford luxurious trips away from home. For some, the idea of not looking at their continuously growing email inbox can feel more overwhelming than simply staying at work. Previous research has shown that a vacation of seven consecutive days is an efficient recovery strategy. However, in 2019, Americans wasted 768 million vacation days (McCarthy, 2019).

One solution to this resistance to vacation is take fewer days off (approximately four nights) multiple times a year. A study of middle managers per the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health demonstrated that any kind of short-term vacation, whether at home or at an alternate location, has both positive and immediate effects on recovery from stress. Although the immediate effects of vacations, whether short or long-term, were generally positive, they often faded very quickly based on the workload waiting for the employee (Blank, et al., 2018).

Although vacation can alleviate the effects of adrenal fatigue in the short-term, it is not a sustainable solution for the other 85% of the year. Per best-selling author Seth Godin, “Instead of wondering when your next vacation is, maybe you should set up a life you don't need to escape from.”

ANTI-DEPRESSANT MEDICATION

One popular allopathic treatment for stress is the anti-depressant medication Fluoxetine (more commonly known by its brand name Prozac). Fluoxetine is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor which helps to rebalance chemicals in the brain for people experiencing depression, panic, anxiety or obsessive-compulsive symptoms. Side effects of Fluoxetine include troubled sleep, headaches, dizziness, tremors, dry mouth, feeling tired, loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting and low libido (Entringer, PharmD).

In today's instant gratification-driven culture, many consider taking medication the fastest and most simple method of treatment. However, this short term solution does not address the underlying cause of suffering: stress. When considering treatment options, it is important to include healthy lifestyle changes in tandem with prescribed medication.

ĀYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE OF ADRENAL FATIGUE

Ayurveda, a 3,500-year-old evidence-based science, equates wellness with healthy digestion (*agni*) and strong immunity (*ojas*). When *agni* is balanced, the body feels strong and energetic, the mind feels clear and at ease, and the soul feels purposeful and connected. *Ojas* is the pure essence formed from proper digestion and tissue development. If tissues develop improperly, *ojas* production can either halt or displace. For optimal health, a woman needs a constant amount of *ojas* stabilized in the heart and the other tissues of her body to maintain immunity and longevity (Lad, 2007).

After a prolonged time of improper *ojas* production or placement, one can experience disharmony within the body and mind. In a state of *ojas* depletion, a woman might experience feelings of anger, hunger, worry, grief, exertion and worry. Insufficient food intake, alcoholic beverages, incompatible foods, insomnia, injury and illness further exacerbate these unpleasant symptoms (Murthy, 2014). Therefore, the food and beverage that a woman consumes has a direct effect on her *ojas*.

According to Ayurveda, dietary and lifestyle factors that deviate from what is considered “common sense” cause adrenal fatigue. Ayurvedic thought determines that this ill use of intellect (*prajnaparadha*) is a causative factor of disease. Living a high-achieving, fast-paced lifestyle costs women their *ojas*. A working woman may vaguely understand that her lifestyle does not benefit her health but she might not realize just how detrimental her actions can be. By not adjusting her life in favor of holistic balance she puts herself at risk of disease formation.

For a relatable example: Siobhan, a Vice President at her company, is focused on a high-profile project with an upcoming month-end deadline. To complete all

the necessary tasks on time, Siobhan chooses to sacrifice sleep, proper diet and exercise for three weeks. At the end of each workday around 11pm, she consumes takeout while watching television, followed by two glasses of wine to take the edge off before bed. If done occasionally, her body can recover. However, perhaps Siobhan's client extends the project. Gradually her nightly routine becomes commonplace. If Siobhan makes no changes in behavior, she may begin to experience feeling low levels of energy, insomnia, anxiousness, exhaustion, weight gain or irregular menstruation. As a bi-product of overusing her adrenal glands, she lowers her resistance to stress and depletes her ojas.

Ayurveda discusses thirteen internal pathways of the body (*srotamsi*). Ayurvedic specialists consider the adrenals a root of the adipose tissue channel (*medavaha srotas*). Medavaha srotas lubricates, protects and insulates the body. From the adrenals, the pathway continues to the development of subcutaneous fat which is either held in the body or released through the sweat glands. If the adrenals are fatigued, this lack of productivity will impact rest of the pathway and the body's day-to-day functions.

ĀYURVEDIC TREATMENT PROTOCOL OF ADRENAL FATIGUE

Women suffering from the effects of adrenal fatigue can often find relief by adjusting their diet, lifestyle and the way they manage stress. If they can implement these changes as a part of a steady routine, they may not require further treatment. However, as a second line of defense, there are supportive herbs and other natural remedies to help with specific disorders.

To boost ojas, Ayurveda recommends physical rejuvenation through proper rest, nourishing diet and emotional support. As an extended measure, taking adaptogens may ease unpleasant symptoms as well.

PROPER REST

Commonly used sayings such as, "I'll sleep when I'm dead" and "sleep is a luxury that I can't afford", demonstrate the de-prioritization of sleep in our culture. However, sleep plays a critical role in our cognitive function, clarity, stability and stress. According to Astanga Hrdayam, "happiness and unhappiness, nourishment (good physique) and emaciation, strength and debility, sexual prowess and impotence, knowledge and ignorance, life and death – all are dependent on sleep" (Murthy, 2014). Therefore, many Ayurvedic wellness plans suggest creating a consistent sleep schedule. A consistent routine can ease the nervous system and allow the body to shift into a regenerative state.

Ayurveda recommends that sleep mirror the circadian rhythms of nature. By following the sun, one has the power to change the quality of sleep. For example, consider two women; we will call them Woman A and Woman B. Woman A sleeps

from 10pm to 6am and Woman B sleeps from 1am to 9am. According to Ayurveda, although they both sleep eight hours, Woman A reaps the rewards of the body's nighttime detoxification process which begins around 10pm. Woman B's sleep schedule disrupts this natural process. As a result, she may not process emotions and thoughts as well as meals to the fullest extent, thus creating toxicity in the body and mind (*ama*). Ayurveda recommends that Woman B adjust her bedtime by fifteen minutes each week for as long as it takes to routinely fall asleep by 10pm.

A relaxing bedtime routine protects ojas. Healing pre-bedtime activities include journaling, drinking warm milk and massaging the feet. These rituals reduce stress and boost optimism after a tiresome workday. Additionally, Ayurvedic thought recommends sleep as a remedy for those who endure chronic stress. A short nap can re-ground a hard morning of work or a moment of worry.

For the ambitious working woman, the idea of sleeping in or napping might feel challenging. However, it is important to move forward as a culture that validates self-care. Instead of "powering through" with coffee and other stimulants, the average woman can choose to prioritize wellness in order to prevent a life of tending to illness.

NOURISHING DIET

When rebuilding ojas, it is important to consider the foods one consumes and the activities one performs regularly. Are these additive or detrimental to one's well-being? The rebuilding and rejuvenative processes begin by removing elements that detract from wellness and replace them with healthier alternatives.

One can begin by removing all poisons from the diet, including alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, excess caffeine (more than 1-2 cups), refined sugar, trans fats and highly processed foods. Consuming products of this nature slows, halts or reverses the healing process. Once detrimental foods are eliminated, an individual can consume vata-pacifying foods. These meals include warm and cooked foods, high quality grains, fruits, vegetables, oils, and cultured dairy products. Lastly, women recovering from adrenal fatigue should incorporate foods that boost ojas directly, including non-homogenized milk, dates, saffron and almonds.

The Western mentality highly regards smoothies and salads as the healthiest foods one can consume. According to Ayurvedic thought, however, the bitter, astringent, uncooked qualities of these foods elicit difficulties in digestion, especially for those with weak adrenals. Ayurveda recommends foods that are sweet to help rebuild vital tissues and promote ojas production. Salty and sour tastes support this process as well. Sweet foods that aid ojas production include sweet potatoes, pure maple syrup, whole grains, ghee (clarified butter) and milk. Limes, sea salt and seaweed fall into the restorative salty and sour foods category.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Women can suffer from adrenal fatigue for years before recognizing and acknowledging their symptoms. Many women attribute the symptoms to aging or work. Due to the nature of this condition, women may visit countless doctors and seek alternative ways to find relief. Many do not consider the benefits of emotional support on their journey to recovery.

Emotional support helps women find the strength to embrace a healthier, happier life. A woman's health benefits from maintaining relationships with other uplifting women. This support can come from one's family, friends, mentors and colleagues. Overall, positive association and laughter are beneficial therapies that can reduce stress in the body and mind.

Women can seek more formalized emotional support through health coaching and counseling. Women experiencing adrenal fatigue can benefit from ongoing encouragement, accountability and optimism. By working with professionals, she not only receives a space to release emotions but techniques to overcome personal obstacles. Seeking professional support can help anyone to prioritize their well-being alongside their meaningful aspirations.

ADAPTOGENIC HERBS

According to Ayurveda, there are natural herbs and substances that improve one's ability to cope with stress. These are referred to as adaptogenic herbs, or rasayanas. They are non-toxic in standard doses and can increase resistance to physical and mental stressors. Two of the most effective herbs are Ashwagandha and Tulsi; both of which help you better adapt to stress.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) has rejuvenating effects on the entire endocrine system. This herb boosts the immune system, combats stress and improves memory. Furthermore, Ashwagandha eases anxiety and depression without causing drowsiness. Additionally, Ashwagandha pacifies our response to stress. It heals the effects of chronic fatigue “not by pushing the glandular system to create more energy, but because it can actually prevent the fight-or-flight response by promoting feelings of calm even amidst stress” (Teitelbaum, 2019).

Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) is the second most frequently recommended adaptogenic herb. In India it is regarded as sacred and in some regions, worshiped. Tulsi, also known as holy basil, is antibacterial, antiviral, anti-fungal and anti-inflammatory. The herb helps your body to adapt to stress, can address sexual problems, improves quality of sleep, reduces forgetfulness and energizes the consumer. Those that take this herb report less anxiety, stress and depression (Teitelbaum, 2019). Tulsi increases clarity, tranquility, joy, and vitality.

Before taking any herbal medication, one should work with an Ayurvedic practitioner or health counselor to determine whether an apoptogenic herb would support their well-being.

CONCLUSION

Allopathic and Ayurvedic medicine both offer remedies that reduce the effects of adrenal fatigue. However, these perspectives approach treatment differently. Allopathic medicine focuses on the symptoms expressed (localized treatment), while Ayurvedic medicine addresses the root cause of the problem (holistic treatment).

Although the allopathic and Ayurvedic treatments outlined appear simplistic, they are transformative if applied consistently. As Dr. Vasant Lad writes:

“Do not label a condition as trigeminal neuralgia, Parkinson's disease, or herpes zoster; these are Western terms. We must look at it [disease] in a simpler way: which dosha is out of balance, which tissues are affected, and which organ or system is involved. Ayurveda offers an approach of simplicity and treatment should be plain and simple” (Lad, 2007).

In 2020, companies have just begun to acknowledge the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of the women workforce. Many highlight and uplift women in leadership positions. Even so, there is still a long way to go. For the sustainability of human capital, employers must consider wellness programming that allows an employee to realize their potential and succeed in their career without sacrificing their health and well-being.

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