

The Progression of “Stress” in Ladies Home Journal

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In today's twenty-first century society it is difficult to read a woman's magazine without coming upon at least one article related to stress. Current women's magazines are filled with articles on how stress affects one's love life, hair, skin, children, and overall well-being and happiness. However, stress is not a new concept. Doctors have been studying the mind-body relationship for over 2,000 years, but they used different vocabulary to describe it. Stress, particularly in females, was often referred to as "hysteria" or "nervousness." These terms imply that stress was traditionally seen as a female problem that resulted from emotional weakness and lack of self-control. These traditional beliefs about the nature of stress were not called into question until the mid 20th century, and it was not until the late 1970's that stress was openly discussed in the classic women's magazine, Ladies Home Journal. It is interesting to observe how the term "stress" was introduced to the female public of the mid 20th century, as well as what that introduction says about the nature of stress in today's modern society.

Like most magazines, Ladies Home Journal (LHJ) is a mixture of regular columns and guest features. One of the regular columns in the 1950's was written by a woman named Dorothy Thompson. Traditionally printed in the beginning of the magazine, Thompson's articles were written for the female intellect and focused on current international politics, domestic turmoil, interesting social phenomena, and medical discoveries. It is not surprising that the first references to stress printed in 1950's LHJ magazines were found in Thompson's column. The first of these articles, printed in April of 1955, was entitled "Are We Scaring Ourselves to Death?" This particular article focused on an apparent increase in public education and community awareness of serious diseases, as well as on medical studies being conducted in the hopes of changing such statistics. However, what is most fascinating about this article is not what it says about mental disease as a public affliction, but rather how it discusses the nature of mental illness. For example, in the first paragraph Thompson writes, "As for mental disease, we are all, it

would seem, suffering from 'neuroses' and an appalling proportion of our population from insanity."^{1a} However, just a few pages later Thompson describes "mental and emotional stresses" in the context of introducing the growing field of psychosomatic medicine.^{1b} Thompson's article exemplifies the slow transformation from stress being viewed as a weakness to stress being viewed as a disease. She introduces her article with the terminology of the time, which was, in the eyes of her middle class white female readers, "neuroses," and then slowly introduces the concept of "stress" as an actual disease resulting from the physical effects of the mind-body relationship. However, Thompson ends her article by referring to "strain" as opposed to "stress."^{1c} It appears that although the concept of emotional stresses was something that the public would be familiar with, or at least understand, the term "stress" itself did not yet exist in the everyday vocabulary of the 1955 female public.

Just two years later Thompson once again focused her monthly column on stress, this time under the term "anxiety." What is interesting about the word anxiety is that, unlike neuroses, anxiety began as a synonym for stress but soon developed its own definition with a slightly different meaning. For example, Thompson's July 1957 article was entitled "The Banishment of Anxiety." In this article Thompson used the term "anxiety" to refer to all kinds of emotional stresses and fears. However, in her April 1960 column entitled "May I Tell You About My Heart Attack?" she referred to both "stress" and "anxiety" as separate but related concepts: "You are more likely to suffer [a heart attack] if your reaction to conditions of stress is anxiety than if it is anger." This 1960 article is also the first time that the term "stress" appeared on its own in a Ladies Home Journal article. However, the majority of the article still traditionally referred to "tension" or "emotional stresses," demonstrating how the term "stress" still had not yet truly emerged as an independent concept.^{2a,2b}

Thompson's articles presented the concept of stress as a disease. However, Thompson's intellectual articles represent only one way in which the concept of stress

was introduced to the average American female reader. For example, medication ads were often an early forum for the introduction of the concept of stress. Given the confines of this research, the earliest found ad related to stress dates back to February of 1953, in which Anacin was promoted to “Relieve Pain of Headache Neuralgia Neuritis.” In September 1955 the Anacin terminology changed to “tense nervous headaches,”³ and by March 1959 Anacin was advertising its ability to counteract “tension headaches,” a term which is still used today.⁴ Seven years later Anacin’s ad not only advertised its effectiveness in relieving headache pain, but also in backaches caused by “weak, tense muscles, emotional stress and strain.”⁵ Like “tension headaches,” Anacin took advantage of a new disease as a means of advertising its product.

Anacin was unusual in that, most likely for economic reasons, it actually referred to “stress” in its mid-century advertising campaigns. However, many other products referred to the effects of stress by using traditional terminology. For example, an October 1960 advertisement for BAN deodorant referred to the “highly offensive perspiration caused by nervous tension,”⁶ and an April 1966 ad for a sleeping tablet called Sominex advertised to help female sleeplessness that often arose from “a woman’s natural sensitivity and anxiety and simple ‘nerves’ and tensions.”⁷ The Sominex ad is interesting because it used both traditional and slightly more modern terminology, but did so in a manner that still insinuated female weakness. In fact, Sominex actually claimed that it was a “medical fact” that women had innate nervousness. It is ironic that in the midst of the feminist movement a product would advertise as being able to counter the effects of female weakness. For obvious reasons, most other products began to steer away from referring to female neuroses even if they weren’t yet confident in the particular term “stress.” For example, a March 1965 ad for Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia asked its readers, “Does Tension Upset Your System?”⁸ In July 1966 an Excedrin ad quoted a woman discussing her “headaches from tension or exhaustion,” and in December of 1966 Midol advertised its ability to help comfort the tension that comes with monthly menstruation.⁹ Ads from products like Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia and Excedrin help illustrate the beginning stages of the slow transformation from referring to female “neuroses”, which implies female weakness and lack of self-control, to referring to general “tension” which implies that outside factors affect a woman’s mental and physical well-being. This change in perception of the nature of stress helps to exemplify the increasing success of the gender equality movement, as well as the overall change in society’s view of women at the time.

By the late 1960’s the concept of stress was becoming well-known to the American public. Products felt comfortable advertising their ability to counteract the effects of “tension” and “anxiety,” and actual articles and columns began to appear that specifically focused on issues of mental and emotional well-being. One of the first of these articles was printed in April 1967 and was entitled “Finally a Sure Cure for Housewife Fatigue.”¹⁰ This lengthy article, written by medical professional

Walter E. O’Donnell, M.D., discussed a young housewife who was suffering from “psychogenic fatigue,” otherwise known as “nervous exhaustion” or “the tired housewife syndrome.”¹⁰ O’Donnell discussed how this housewife almost always felt as though she was in a “state of great anxiety, almost panic.”¹⁰ While on the surface this article seems to be explaining the daunting job of being a housewife and how factors beyond her control may lead to fatigue and anxiety, when really examined this article seems more reflective of the traditional view that stress results from female disorganization and inability to control one’s own life. Most of O’Donnell’s suggestions for how to counteract “the tired housewife syndrome” involve having such women get up in the morning, shower and put themselves together, and then make a written schedule for the day that they commit themselves to follow. O’Donnell seems to be suggesting, and rightly so, that “stress” can be derived from a lack of things to do as well as from an overburdened schedule. It would be interesting to note if Dr. O’Donnell would suggest these same stress treatments to women who worked outside the home, and therefore presumably would already be familiar with the importance of routine.

In many ways O’Donnell’s article is like Excedrin ads of the mid 1960’s. Although O’Donnell’s article did not specifically use the term “stress,” he discussed what we would today refer to as “stress” through more traditional terminology such as “fatigue,” “anxiety,” and “panic.” However, by 1969 the term “stress” was beginning to replace such traditional terminology in both articles and ads. For example, in January 1969 LHM published an article entitled “What ‘The Pill’ Does to Husbands,” written by Robert W. Kistner, M.D.^{11a} Kistner’s article discussed how a man’s sperm count was lowered by “fatigue, tension, and worry – all ingredients of a stressful situation.”^{11b} Furthermore, Kistner’s article exclaimed that “combining the problems of stress with excessive smoking, overindulgence in alcohol and the use of certain drugs such as amphetamines, the American male is lucky if he can become aroused at all.”^{11b} However, while Kistner writes a very pointed article on the effects of stress on fertility, he interestingly enough compares some of the male’s “stress” symptoms to that of a woman suffering from “acute anxiety or hysteria.” It is interesting that Kistner, a medical professional, would write an article for a women’s magazine that explained “stress” as a viable physical affliction for men, but still referred to women as suffering from “hysteria.” Kistner’s incongruence in terminology reaffirms the fact that although “stress” was beginning to replace traditional terminology, that the transformation was not yet complete.

In the 1950’s LHM had published a 200+ page magazine every month. However by the mid 1960’s the magazines became progressively thinner. The intellectual articles of the 50’s written by women like Margaret Hickey and Dorothy Thompson became hard to find, and were instead replaced with a smattering of articles on fashion, cooking, dieting, and home-crafts. Monthly editions would feature a specific food such as “mayonnaise,” and devote pages to recipes that could be made with that product. As televisions became more common, women no

longer relied on magazines like LHJ to provide them with lengthy stories to pass the time and the number of fictional stories published each month slowly dwindled. By the end of the 1960's, in effect, LHJ became a fad magazine, where women could go to find out about the latest trends but not much else. The articles by Drs. Kistner and O'Donnell signify a new era for LHJ.

The dawn of the 1970's saw new monthly columns written by medical professionals, such as "Medicine Today," written by Phyllis Wright, M.D. and David Zimmerman, which focused on medical discoveries affecting one's physical health. Another new column, "Dr. Rubin," written by Theodore I. Rubin, M.D., focused on one's mental and emotional health. Throughout most of the 1970's these medical columns discussed "stress" and its effects on a person's overall well-being, but still shied away from the actual term. For example, one of the first "Medicine Today" articles featured a section on airline stewardesses and how they often suffered from "emotional crises and breakdowns" due to "anxiety, gloom or depression."¹² A section of May 1971's "Medicine Today" discussed how more and more young women were experiencing "emotional difficulties" and "anxiousness,"¹³ and the July 1972 "Dr. Rubin" article explained most people have suffered from a least one period of "emotional distress" and that many people pay an "emotional price for hidden anger."¹⁴ Ironically, the July 1972 "Dr. Rubin" article also stated that many men and women are "anxious about their own psychological well-being."¹⁴ While from one perspective it seems humorous that people were stressed about being stressed, on the other hand that conundrum signifies that concepts of emotional health and stress were truly becoming part of Americans' way of thinking about their overall well-being.

As these two sister columns continued throughout the early 1970's they continually discussed the mind-body relationship and physical symptoms of one's emotional health. For example, a December 1972 "Dr. Rubin" article discussed how anxiety

had led to night-eating and therefore chronic obesity, and the December 1973 "Your Questions Answered" (the new title for the traditional "Dr. Rubin" column) stated that "anxious, tense people actually do have a problem with how they smell because anxiety brings on excessive perspiration and an ammonia-like odor."¹⁵ Early 1970's columns like "Dr. Rubin" and "Medicine Today" show how the public was not only becoming aware of stress as a specific "disease," but also as a trigger and explanation for other physical problems. The discussion of stress as an underlying factor in many common health problems signifies that the public was fairly comfortable with the concept of stress as a disease and was now ready to learn and explore how personal stress was affecting their lives overall, and most importantly, what they could do to prevent it.

In addition to these columns which broadly discussed mental and emotional health concerns, the 1970's saw a rise in the number of actual articles written on stress and related topics. Similar to later columns, many of these articles not only specifically discussed "stress," but did so in the context of its effects on other medical problems. One of the first such articles on stress and its physical effects was published in September 1970 and entitled "Don't Let Tension Destroy Your Looks."¹⁶ This article focused on how living with high tension is the "arch enemy" of beauty, and how "nervously tense people seem to have more hair problems than their fair share."¹⁶ More importantly, the article explained how warm baths with light steam and scented water would banish "stress," and quite possibly old "stress marks" as well.¹⁶ This article was only the beginning of LHJ educating its readership on the effects of "stress" on one's personal appearance. In October 1972 Dr. Rubin confirmed a reader's suspicions that "skin conditions have emotional origin"¹⁷ and the August 1973 "Medicine Today" discussed how "stress and strain" affect the strength of hair.¹⁸

Although stress was discussed in more superfluous contexts such as hair strength and skin conditions, most of the early 1970's articles on



stress focused on heart disease, a concept that the public had been slowly exposed to for almost two decades. In January 1972 Christiaan Barnard, M.D., one of the most respected heart surgeons at the time, wrote an article for LHJ entitled "What Women Should Know About Heart Attacks."^{19a} Unlike previous articles in which the effects of stress were merely mentioned in passing, Barnard dedicated an entire section of his article to "Stress and Your Heart", where he discussed how the stress of modern living had a detrimental effect on the function of one's heart, thereby increasing one's chances of suffering from a heart attack.^{19b} In April 1973 Lynda Johnson Robb, the daughter of the recently deceased President Lyndon B. Johnson, wrote an article entitled "How to Prevent Heart Attacks" in which she encouraged people to be wary of built up tension and stress.^{20a} Robb encouraged people to make time for rest, and shy away from temporary tension-relieving activities such as smoking in favor of true life-style changes.^{20b}

By the late 1970's stress and its effects were well-known to the American public. Although it had taken over two decades, the term "stress" had definitively replaced traditional terminology such as "hysteria" and "nervousness." In October 1978 LHJ published a

feature article entitled “Children Under Stress: How Our Schools Fail” written by Mary Susan Miller. Not only did Miller specifically discuss the nature of both positive and negative stress as discussed in Hans Selye’s book *Stress Without Distress*, she explained how all children, on some level, are suffering from classroom stress and the high expectations of their role models.^{21a} Miller stated that “perhaps the single most stressful element in our education system is competitiveness.”^{21b} Miller explained that while some competition is inevitable, the goal of the classroom should be to help children experience positive stress as they learn to reach their own highest potential. Most importantly, Miller concluded her article by stating that “schools alone don’t create stress in children, nor are they solely responsible for solving the problem.”^{21c} Miller then proceeded to provide parents with a list of “stress signals,” as well as ways to counteract and prevent stress in their children’s lives.^{21c}

In December 1978, just two months after Miller’s article was published, a reader wrote into LHJ. “How terrible to think that children are just as subject to stress and depression as grownups are,” Cynthia Graham of San Francisco wrote. She continued by saying that “the article was a shocker, but perhaps if we become better aware of our children’s tensions and anger, we can work to give them the carefree childhood that they are entitled to.” Graham’s comments demonstrate the culmination of “stress” becoming part of the American female vocabulary. Although women sometimes found new developments on stress hard to believe, they understood articles like the one published in March 1979 entitled “How to Get a Good Night’s Sleep” in which Joann Ellison Rodgers explained how modern stresses affects one’s ability to rest, and Dr. Helen A. De Rosis’s August 1979 article on stress as an underlying cause of marital problems. By the late 1970’s LHJ readers knew what stress was, both as a concept and as a disease, and were now ready to learn how to prevent stress from taking over their once happy lives.

People are often wary of new medical discoveries, especially when they relate to their own lives. Although people had always been familiar with the concepts of “hysteria” and “nervousness,” these terms were mainly used to describe female weakness and females’ inability to control their own lives. “Stress” changed that image because it did not imply innate female weakness, but rather helped to justify and explain how outside factors play a role in the mental and physical health of all Americans. The 1970’s was a decade of feminism and increased opportunities for women. In many ways, “stress” as a disease that affected men and women alike became just another component of that gender equality.

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1. Thompson, Dorothy. “Are We Scaring Ourselves to Death?” Ladies Home Journal Apr. 1955.
 - a. Pg. 11
 - b. Pg. 18
 - c. Pg. 21
 2. Thompson, Dorothy. “May I Tell You About My Heart Attack?” Ladies Home Journal Apr. 1960.
 - a. Pg. 12
 - b. Pg. 17
 3. Anacin Headache Reliever. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Sep. 1955: 42.
 4. Anacin Headache Reliever. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Mar. 1959: 37.
 5. Anacin Headache Reliever. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Mar. 1966: 177.
 6. BAN Deodorant. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Oct. 1960: 1.
 7. Sominex Sleeping Tablet. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Apr. 1966: 72.
 8. Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Mar. 1965: 52.
 9. Midol. Advertisement. Ladies Home Journal Dec. 1966: 58.
 10. O’Donnell, Walter E. “Finally a Sure Cure for Housewife Fatigue.” Ladies Home Journal Apr. 1967: 74.
 11. Kistner, Robert W. “What ‘The Pill’ Does to Husbands.” Ladies Home Journal Jan. 1969.
 - a. Pg. 66.
 - b. Pg. 68.
 12. Wright, Phyllis. “Medicine Today.” Ladies Home Journal June 1969: 34.

13. Wright, Phyllis. “Medicine Today.” Ladies Home Journal May 1971: 28.
14. Rubin, Theodore I. “Dr. Rubin.” Ladies Home Journal July 1972: 46.
15. “Your Questions Answered.” Ladies Home Journal Dec. 1973: 24.
16. “Don’t Let Tension Destroy Your Looks.” Ladies Home Journal Sep. 1970: 121.
17. Rubin, Theodore I. “Dr. Rubin.” Ladies Home Journal Oct. 1972: 50.
18. Wright, Phyllis. “Medicine Today.” Ladies Home Journal Aug. 1973: 38.
19. Barnard, Christiaan. “What Women Should Know About Heart Attacks.” Ladies Home Journal Jan. 1972.
 - a. Pg. 92.
 - b. Pg. 50.
20. Robb, Lynda Johnson. “How to Prevent Heart Attacks.” Ladies Home Journal Apr. 1973.
 - a. Pg. 125.
 - b. Pg. 24.
21. Miller, Mary Susan. “Children Under Stress: How Our Schools Fail.” Ladies Home Journal Oct. 1978.
 - a. Pg. 110.
 - b. Pg. 112.
 - c. Pg. 224.

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