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RAGE gracefully

Who Weekly, National

HEALTH

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Can suppressed anger really lead to poor health?

We've always known that stress is linked to poor mental and physical health. But social media has recently become flooded with posts about how suppressed anger and chronic stress in women could be linked to burnout and autoimmune diseases.

While the science is nuanced, experts say we need to have an important conversation about the long-term effects of stress on the body.

It comes as no surprise that women are stressed – for generations we have been encouraged to put everyone else's needs in front of our own, and 'feminine rage', aka the years of internalised stress, is taking a toll on our health.

Speaking to WHO, clinical psychologist Jaimie Bloch explains, "Chronic suppression of emotion is reliably associated with worse physiological stress markers, elevated cortisol, higher inflammatory markers (IL-6, CRP) and poorer cardiovascular recovery from stress.

"Chronic stress and dysregulated cortisol are also known to modulate immune function, and there's a body of epidemiological work linking high chronic stress, trauma history and major life stress to increased onset or flares of autoimmune conditions," she adds.

"But it's not a single-cause story. Autoimmune disease is multifactorial – genetics, hormones, infections, environment – and stress is best understood as one contributor that can influence timing and severity rather than 'the' cause."

Bloch says it is "wildly oversimplified" to suggest that stress always leads to something like an autoimmune disease.

Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society, adds, "In popular discourse, 'feminine rage' generally refers to anger arising from sexism, gender inequality, male violence

and cultural expectations for women to minimise anger and prioritise harmony. Emotional suppression, by contrast, is a psychological construct, referring to the conscious inhibition of emotional expression."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SUPPRESS ANGER OR STRESS CONSTANTLY?

Bloch reveals that suppressing anger and stress actually takes a lot of "ongoing mental effort", with the psychologist comparing it to "carrying a heavy bag around all day".

"Over time, people who do this a lot get worse at recognising what they're actually feeling – the signal gets muddier instead of clearer. And ironically, suppressing an emotion doesn't make it go away," she says.

"It tends to make you think about it more, not less, and the feeling often gets stronger rather than fading. Do this consistently over months or years, and it's linked to higher rates of anxiety and depression down the track."

It also triggers your body's stress response, meaning your heart might race, your blood pressure might increase.

"It's like revving a car engine without ever letting it drive anywhere," she notes. "Do that over and over without ever 'releasing' the tension, and it wears the body down over time, the same way constant low-grade strain wears down a machine. That ongoing stress keeps your stress hormone system – the one that pumps out cortisol – switched on for too long, and eventually that starts throwing your immune system off balance.

"Sometimes it makes it underactive, sometimes it tips it towards the kind of inflammation involved in autoimmune conditions," she adds.

SIGNS YOU'RE CARRYING CHRONIC STRESS

So how do you know if you need to stress less? Chronic stress symptoms can be hard to pinpoint as they overlap with other health

conditions, but some signs include:

- persistent fatigue that's not fixed by sleep
- frequent minor illnesses
- digestive issues
- unexplained muscle tension, jaw clenching or teeth grinding
- sleep issues despite being exhausted
- irritability or having a short fuse
- difficulty concentrating
- a feeling of being wired but tired

HEALTHY WAYS TO PROCESS RAGE

Bloch reveals that most psychologists will agree that there are two common extremes when it comes to dealing with anger and stress – bottling things up or letting it all out in an unfiltered way.

"Interestingly, venting alone – like yelling or ranting to get it 'out of your system' – doesn't actually reliably make anger go away, and can sometimes make it worse," she notes.

Instead, she suggests that specifically "naming what you're feeling, not just 'I'm stressed' but 'I'm feeling resentful because...'", has been shown to calm down the brain's threat response."

Writing about your feelings is also helpful, as is some calm self-talk, where you speak up for yourself calmly and directly about what you need, instead of staying silent or lashing out.

"Physical activity also matters, since stress is a bodily response as much as a mental one," she says. "Moving your body through exercise or by shaking out tension helps your system complete that stress cycle instead of leaving it stuck. And therapy approaches like cognitive behavioural therapy can help get to the root of why the anger is there in the first place.

"The overall goal isn't to force yourself to release the emotion, and it isn't to keep a lid on it, either. It's to actually feel it, understand what it's trying to tell you, and then respond to it in a useful way."

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