

Stress and the Single Girl

Five tips for shouldering life's burdens on your own.

by Sara Eckel



When we talk about **women and stress**, the first image that leaps to mind is that of a working mom, frantically juggling car pools and conference calls. Popular culture staples such as *Cosmopolitan* and "Sex and the City" seem to suggest that single women have all the time in the world for painting the town red, soaking in a bubble bath and **keeping a journal**.

There's no doubt that women with children have less personal time than **those who are kid-free**. But being married is not necessarily more stressful than **being single**. The unattached life comes with anxieties of its own, including single-handedly managing a household budget and chores.

Singles also lack the **emotional support** that marriage brings. "After a hard day, there's no one to listen to you and acknowledge you," says Nina Atwood, a therapist based in Dallas. Sociologist David de Vaus of La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, found that never-married women are about 5% more likely to suffer from stress disorders than married women. A study by Linda J. Waite, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago, found that marriage boosts women's physical and mental health and their life expectancy.

But don't think we're joining your grandmother in **putting pressure on you single girls** to get hitched! Instead, we've got some expert suggestions to help you ease the stress and be *happily* single.

1. Build a support network.

If you have no one to call on when you move, get sick or simply need an opinion about where to put your new couch, experts say you'll experience that lack as stress. "Being anchored, being loved and having opportunities to share the everyday things in life are very important for well-being," says De Vaus. While marriage may be the most common way to feel attached, rest assured it's not the only one. Experts recommend getting into the habit of **regularly checking in with your friends** and relatives so that you'll feel more comfortable about asking them to lend a hand when you need one.

You should also seek out other single women as buddies. "If **you're always around couples**, you're going to start feeling kind of alien," says Atwood. "Singles **need other single friends** to debrief about dates and talk about the joys and frustrations of being unattached."

2. Don't put your life on hold.

Since people used to **get married young**, Americans tend to equate marriage with the passage into adulthood. Nowadays, however, millions of adults in their 20s and 30s are staying single — and putting off adult decisions such as establishing retirement funds or buying homes. But putting off major money decisions is not only a poor financial strategy; it's also a very stressful way to live. "There's no guarantee that you'll find the love of your life, but all of us can be pretty sure that one day we'll be old and need money," says Atwood. Getting your finances in order will go a long way toward alleviating your "What will become of me?" anxieties.

3. Celebrate yourself!

You may not have an engagement, wedding or baby to fete, but that doesn't mean you're not taking celebration-worthy steps in your life. "If we're always **comparing ourselves to an ideal standard**, we'll feel stress," says Steven Alper, director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in La Jolla, California. Atwood recommends throwing parties to mark milestones such as snagging a big promotion or new apartment.

4. Leave some stones unturned.

"What do you have to lose?" is often the rhetorical question put to single people when they're encouraged to go on a blind date. The honest answer? An evening of your life. "Dating takes a lot of energy," says Atwood. "To sit face-to-face and answer questions about your life is stressful." If **a friend wants to fix you up**, be discerning — ask her why

she thinks you two are a match. Talk to the potential date on the phone to feel him out. Then, if you want to take it further, agree to meet for something low-key, such as a cup of coffee or a drink after work. That way you won't feel regret — and stress — about wasting an entire evening if the guy turns out to be a dud.

5. Let yourself be boring.

Being a frenetic social butterfly can be unsettling and stressful. "Most people find having a jam-packed social calendar very tiring," says Atwood. Your married friends aren't ashamed to make it a Blockbuster night 10 Saturdays in a row, and neither should you be. "We all need a break from social exposure — psychological downtime when you don't have to perform in any way," says Atwood. "Single women need it just as much as married women." Dashing to countless social events and meeting **lots of people might lead you to Mr. Right**, but then again, so could relaxing and enjoying your life as if it — and you — were already complete.