

## Winter 2008 WST 200: The Superwoman Syndrome

Class Discussion Notes from April 2008

Despite the gains women have made over the past few decades, 'liberation' hasn't always panned out to be liberating. . . . In real life terms, liberation for many women means assuming multiple roles, taking on multiple responsibilities and being the subject of multiple expectations. Working women who hold down demanding professional jobs are expected to be great mothers, attentive spouses, extended family coordinators, resourceful meal planners, interesting sex partners and not just do it well ... but live up to the unrealistic expectations encoded in female role model depictions on the media. -AIDAN MACONACHY (PhillyBurbs.com: <http://www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/news/315-11012007-1433841.html> )

We must decide what is truly important to us. Part of the trap with SS is that it keeps women so busy trying to keep up we never take the time to work out what we really want. If something is truly important to us, then ask ourselves what we have to do to make it happen. . . . The challenge for all of us is to start seeing other women's achievements as a source of inspiration, not irritation, and to pick our triumphs. Given that we are on this planet for 80 years on average, do we really want to spend 40 of them trying compete with everyone and be someone who we are not? I don't think so. -June (June's Diary: <http://moodcommunication.blogspot.com/2007/04/superwoman-syndrome-ss.html> )

**superwoman syndrome:** the perception that one must be perfect in all things: perfect on the job, at home, in one's body image, in one's relationships, etc. The syndrome may stem from the same kinds of nervous anxiety that produce eating disorders, and it is likely exacerbated by commercials and other social pressures. It has been associated with professional women who work all day at high-power careers and transform themselves into perfect housewives and mothers in the evening, but in recent years it has shown up in the attitudes of younger and younger women.

### Foreword

The Winter 2008 class was especially perceptive in addressing the superwoman syndrome and the variety of social pressures young women experience, seeing these as a problematic trend among women in the younger generation. The following notes and documents are the fruit of these semester-long discussions. Special thanks go to Yirrsi Bergman for her oral presentation on the syndrome, and to Erin Craig, whose lists formed the basis for the discussion that followed. Finally, thanks to Gail Brown, author of *Where Are the Footnotes? A Guide for The Non-Traditional Female College Student*; Gail's response (see Appendix) provides an older woman's perspective on the superwoman syndrome and thus significantly enlarges the discussion.

### *from Yirrsi Bergman's oral presentation: The Superwoman Syndrome*

**Thesis:** Because of the changes in society and our liberation as women, we now can go out into the workforce and do our best. But the truth is that we are now having double the jobs. We have to take care of work and do our best, and at the same time go home and take care of it, and of the children if we have any. Although men do help, . . . most of them see it as a concession rather than equality. All these expectations and the added ones depending on our individual lives create a very stressful environment, which may lead to what is called the "Superwoman Syndrome."

**Do Everything:** A woman from New Zealand writes, "superwoman syndrome seems to be a rampant disease and one which I am struggling with at present. I have recently begun to accept that I can't do everything I think I should. This results in me feeling like a failure. I am always sure that everyone else is coping and fine and I can't understand why I can't keep up with everything."

**Which women fall prey:** “A high achiever by nature, she may have experienced having much responsibility from a young age,” explains Dr. Gabriela Cora, president of The Executive Health & Wealth Institute and author of a self-published book, *Leading Under Pressure: Strategies to Maximize Peak Performance & Productivity While Maximizing Health & Wellbeing*. “There may have been high expectations about her ability to perform and succeed. Oftentimes, she feeds on people praising her abilities to be the superwoman, usually thanking and complaining—as a victim—of her overextended schedule at the same time.”

**Where it comes from:** The Superwoman Syndrome joined the syndrome list in 1984, with Marjorie Hansen Shaevitz’s book of the same title. In the 1989 book, *The Second Shift*, University of California-Berkeley professor Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung revealed the domestic toll superhero status takes on women as they punch the clock at home and at work. Since then, the term has become synonymous with the unreal expectations placed on working women who try to be mom, wife, and employee at the same time.

**Third Shift:** Author/researcher Michele Bolton says, “women work three shifts. They work one shift at their workplace, a second shift at home taking care of their families, and a third shift in their minds, conducting a continuous inner dialogue at second-guessing whatever actions and decisions have filled their days. . . Women are expected to fulfill significant actions and decisions and leadership roles at work—prove themselves—and also retain a nurturing, other-oriented role in the family and broader community.”

**Beyond Superwoman:** In the book *Beyond Superwoman: 25 Top CEOs Show Us How to Get a Life*, former CEO of Palm Pilot, the president of E\*Trade, the mayor of San Jose, California, a vice president at Hewlett-Packard and dean of the Stanford Law School answer “how can I do it all?” with a sobering “you can’t, and neither could we.”

**Symptoms:** symptoms reported include trouble sleeping, depression, anxiety, irritability, mood swings, and being overweight. In the same study, “love relationships” were identified as a potential stressor experienced by women. You know you may be falling into the trap if you note:

- <excessive demands on your time
- <unrealistic expectations of yourself, or of colleagues, family and close friends.
- <feelings of being “out of control”
- <feelings of helplessness or inadequacy
- <feelings of tension
- <frequent headaches
- <frequent anger or irritability
- <feelings of sadness or nervousness
- <changes in sleep pattern or appetite
- <loss of energy, sex drive, or pleasure from everyday activities
- <difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- <feelings of apathy or loss of interest in life or family
- <feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, or pessimism

**Treatable:** If you find yourself on the verge of distress, take a deep breath, exhale slowly and then take one or more of the following steps:

- <Prioritize personal and professional responsibilities
- <Learn the magic of the simple word *no*
- <Set realistic expectations: Superwoman and Supermom are fictional characters

- <Don't play the "blame game"
- <Ask others to "share the load" [dialogue with others; delegate responsibilities]
- <Never do yourself what technology can do for you
- <Set aside "Me" time and demand that it be respected.

**More Tips:**

- <Manage your time productively. It reduces stress.
- <Learn to be assertive. Assertive behavior decreases stress. Being assertive means expressing yourself (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) honestly and tactfully while respecting the rights of others.
- <Develop a support network. [e.g. consciousness-raising meetings, "goddess parties," or vacation time with friends, as in an all-women's shopping trip to Shiphewanna].
- <Remember the "four pillars of biological health": exercise, nutrition, sleep, and relaxation.

**Conclusion:** In *Women and Fatigue*, Dr. Marion Hilliard states, "from the time a woman is born until she dies, she is not only a woman but also a person. All persons have basic human needs. The basic need for every woman is to have a central core inside herself, a center and a strength that is entirely her own. Without this, she's going to be whatever turns up—whatever the economy asks, or what men think beautiful, or what the children want to make them happy."

**Works Consulted**

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**Class Discussion: Two Lists**

Thanks to Erin Craig for Initial List.

**Some Stressors/ Pressures on young women**

Being a partier—yet have it together  
Being thin—but voluptuous  
Being Trendy—follow the crowd (media or fashion)  
Being Sexy—but not “slutty”—to be a “lady”  
To be in college and achieve highly  
To get married—eventually  
To have beautiful flawless skin  
To have children—yet maintain a career  
To bring children everywhere as needed—to be a “soccer mom”  
To keep a clean house  
To cook  
To keep children occupied, get them ready  
To look youthful  
To look happy  
To be smart—but passive (Erin’s note: this I never will understand)  
To be agreeable  
To be “needed”

**Preventing the breakdown of one’s true self**

Assertiveness: Speak your mind, vent if needed—take control of what you say, what you’ll accept and what you won’t.  
Ask for help when needed  
Women helping women: surround yourself with positive people  
Be knowledgeable in your own nutrition  
Center yourself: meditation or exercise  
Have an activity just for you (yoga, dance, art)  
Take a self defense class (both fun and empowering)  
Travel  
Know your own likes and dislikes  
Read  
Have nights just for friends  
Set aside “Me” time  
Trust your own beliefs and opinions  
Be comfortable with how you look without makeup (Don’t get trapped behind the goop, because that’s not really you!)  
Not being embarrassed to speak about women’s natural rhythms and functions  
Don’t fear being single  
Try something new  
Talk to a counselor  
Divide tasks with a partner (dialogue and delegate as needed)

**Appendix: An Older Woman's Response to This Document**

by Gail Brown

(author of *Where are the Footnotes? A Guide for the Non-traditional Female College Student*.  
American Em.Press, 2008.)

I could not help but notice that this document made reference to “younger” women and the Superwoman or Supermom Syndrome. It seems as though a young woman is separated from her older self as if they are two separate people. The Superwoman Syndrome may present itself at a very early age, but in fact, older women must face the same issues and more. Many women who escape the syndrome in their younger years and have much confidence in themselves can experience a lack of confidence in their later years when their spouse dies or they find themselves divorced at a later age and must face the fact that men their age prefer women who are 20-30 years their junior - unfortunately I received a call from a friend last week who is an educated supermom/superwoman and experiencing just that.

Also, in the sentence “...it keeps women so busy trying to keep up we never take the time to work out what we really want.” Well, by the time we work out what we really want, we must then try to find a way to actually GET what we want before we hit the grave. Many times this cannot be done until a major element is removed from our lives, such as the departure of a spouse or significant other or our children have grown up and left home.

Most articles I have read seem to focus on women who have already achieved some level of personal accomplishment before they married and not those who were not able to achieve because they chose spouse and family before higher education or some other form of fulfillment. If a woman is older and did not establish the tips suggested in “Preventing the breakdown of one's true self”, she is operating at a disadvantage because her family has been set in their ways for many years and sometimes this cannot be changed.

I do not know if discussion of this aspect (a woman as a whole instead of separation of the younger woman and her older self) would be possible if the class consists of younger women who cannot relate as of yet or a younger instructor who has not experienced the transition as of yet.