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There's an epidemic of burnout in professional women. It's not just working mothers and caregivers, torn between the demands of work and home, nor senior executives worn thin from age and long years of fighting bias. Even young women - child-free, ambitious, and less than a decade into their careers - can fall into pernicious, soul-level exhaustion.

Since the advent of agriculture 10,000 years ago, women have never had more opportunity than today. We're educated, dedicated, and we have big dreams. We're using our hard-won legal rights and cultural acceptance to forge professional careers in formerly male-dominated industries. We want to make an impact, create exemplary products, and start game-changing companies. We're badass and yet...

#### **...something feels profoundly off.**

Our colleagues jockey for the upper edge in meetings. Aggression and dominance are rewarded, even when company "values" emphasize team-work. The loudest and most insistent voices win. While perfectly able to join in the melee, it's not our preferred style. Worse yet, unconscious biases make competitive participation problematic. Women who speak up assertively are deemed bitchy and hard-edged. Those who demur are written off as soft and ineffectual. Our brains engage in a never-ending Goldilocks calculus of external perception, attempting to find the female version of "just right." Co-workers compare notes on lack of sleep, one upping each other for fewest hours of rest and latest time stamps on emails. Male colleagues provoke one another, throwing out challenges and taunts.

We play along. No one wants to be accused of being the proverbial "snowflake," unable to handle the pressures of "real world" business, but this game that seems exhilarating to some leaves us profoundly tired. We ricochet between pouring everything we have into our jobs and just barely hanging on. We silently wonder if we lack the grit and perseverance to make it to the top...or even hang in at the middle. We look around, comparing our experience to our mostly male colleagues. It's hard for them too, yet many revel in the fray and appear to genuinely enjoy the competition. Could it be that pressure enhances their motivation rather than draining it?

We can't, of course, admit these feelings for fear of provoking accusations that we lack the fortitude and drive necessary for leadership and advancement. If we were to step out of the fray, or better yet, challenge it, we risk reinforcing these stereotypes about women. So, we "lean in," attempting to prove ourselves in fraternity-like displays of endurance and dominance. All the while, we anxiously cover our *real* experience: the fatigue, the questioning whether we're cut out for our chosen path, the fear that we'll be found out, anger about the unfairness around us, and self-recrimination that we're not handling it all better.

#### **But what if your exhaustion is a normal and predictable artifact of a design mismatch between your female body and a system of work optimized solely for male biology?**

Leaning in and “you can do this” empowerment messaging will never fix the weariness in your bones and soul.

#### **To be clear: No conflict exists between being female and producing brilliant work, *only between being female and producing this work in a context built for male productivity.***

While many factors are at play (see unconscious bias, stereotype threat, and social/status threat), women and men have a central biological difference.<sup>1</sup> Men produce large amounts of testosterone. While women’s bodies also make testosterone, we produce it differently, in radically lower amounts, and its effects on our brain and behavior are not the same.

Starting around adolescence, men churn out a steady supply of testosterone. Produced in their testes, men easily secrete more when environmental conditions indicate higher levels are beneficial. This androgen hormone, famous for sex-drive and aggression, more accurately amplifies status-seeking behaviors. Its increased presence in the blood stream predisposes men to compete for status *through whatever actions are rewarded in the ambient culture*. In Western culture, including business, this translates to hierarchical, aggressive, competitive and individualistic behaviors.

In men, competition spikes testosterone production and the resulting bump in androgen levels fuel feelings of well-being and confidence. It’s why men get such a high from viewing competitive sports and why male friends goad each other into brutally competitive jousts, both verbal and physical, but leave these interactions with a friendly invigorated handshake.

#### **The world of work *as we know it* was built to privilege testosterone-mediated behavior.**

Women’s bodies also mete out testosterone, but lacking testes, we do so primarily in our adrenal glands. Averaging about five percent of normal male levels, we *can* produce spikes when environmental conditions merit, but we are *not* designed to sustain high levels of androgen hormones on an ongoing basis. Motivation through win-lose competition and threats to status

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<sup>1</sup> It’s always risky to talk about biologically-driven gender differences. The effects of hormones are nuanced and deserving of much better research. Each person is a complex mix of influences, including genetics, hormones, familial background, environment and culture. The dynamics described in this article should be viewed as average tendencies rather than absolutes. To women struggling to understand their contradictory exhaustion and drive, however, the distinctions are useful.

stresses our adrenal glands. (These strategies are not always ideal for men either, only less biologically stressful.)

To understand the possible origins of this biological difference in design, let's go back in time to our evolutionary roots on the African Savanna. Imagine your primary role is giving birth, nurturing children, gathering food and attending to the needs of the community. Your biology is rightly oriented toward diffuse focus, long-term orientation, and the complexity of relational systems. You function in a perfect symbiotic dance with the males of your tribe, who are often engaged in hunting or defending your group from outside threat, roles which benefit from testosterone's competitive drive and focus.

What happens, however, when the men are away and outsiders invade? What if women are needed on the hunt? It's useful, biologically, for women to be capable of invoking testosterone-driven motivation when short-term situations call for it.

**Women can act like men, even brilliantly, but we aren't designed to do so *long-term*.**

When we marinate in androgen-demanding environments on an ongoing basis, we place ourselves at high risk for adrenal burnout, the symptoms of which are low energy, trouble sleeping, weight gain, mood swings, depression, anxiety, brain fog, and autoimmune issues.

Does this mean that women are not, as men have claimed for millennia, suited to the "harsh" world of professional endeavor? Can we attribute the lack of women in top leadership positions to biological unsuitability and not, as we've posited in recent years, bias and barriers? A critical distinction is between motivation and capacity. Women are *capable* of sustained focus, creativity and productivity. How we are best *motivated* and best *manage our energy* differs from men. Female burnout results from default male-oriented management strategies, not an innate inability to perform at the same (or better) level.

While this adrenal phenomenon is only one of many invisible impediments driving inequality in the workplace, addressing our root assumptions about the nature of work is simultaneously the most difficult and promising remedy, both for creating equity in the workplace and for unleashing productivity and innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Cut-throat competition and status-seeking behaviors have sinister downsides, while the communal, interconnected and long-term focus most often associated with women has distinct upsides. Designing work to privilege the biological tendencies of fifty percent of the population not only disadvantages the other half, but forfeits the very real advantages their biological strengths could contribute to leadership. Smart companies will seek to leverage the best biological characteristics in both men and women, but that's a subject for a whole different article.

#### It's time to re-evaluate how work gets done and the behaviors we reward...but what's a girl to do *now*?

It's all very well to say the world of work needs to change, but that's a long-term proposition. For now, we need strategies to survive and thrive with the system *as it stands*. With that in mind, here are a few pointers for charting your own course.

- **Stop evaluating yourself through male standards.** It's okay if you don't derive energy and satisfaction from non-stop competitive jousting and status-seeking maneuvers. It doesn't mean you lack "the right stuff." You're not broken or devoid of professional ambition. It means that you may need to find your motivation and restore your energy differently than the men around you. So, stop adding insult to injury. It's bad enough that your preferences aren't woven into the fabric of workplace culture. Don't double down on that by amplifying the narrative with self-recrimination and internal stories about your lack of toughness.
- **Create your own success criteria.** If you could wave a magic wand and show up as your absolute best self, what would that look like, sound like, feel like? How would you interact with others? What boundaries would you set and hold? How would you deal with conflict? Who and how would you influence others? What ideals and values would you live by? How would you want to be described by others?
- **Pay attention to what feeds your body and soul.** This isn't the same as what you like and enjoy. It's a subtle distinction. I'm not talking about the mindless escapes that help you get through the day without imploding, but rather what uplifts and fills you. You may *enjoy* spending a day at the mall, binge watching Netflix or even catching a game at the local sports bar, but do these activities leave you feeling energized and inspired?

For me right now, it's my Thursday night singing class. I'm learning something new, interacting with positive people, overcoming a long-standing fear of singing in public, and using my voice in a powerful new way. I leave feeling joyful, focused, and refreshed. For you, it could be time spent in nature or engaging in a social cause dear to your heart, listening to live music performed with artistry, fresh cut flowers, or an invigorating deep conversation.

It's different for every person. *The key is not to judge, but to pay attention.* Anything that lights you up and renews your spirit should not be viewed as "treats" and "rewards," but essential soul hygiene.

- **Get to know your needs and boundaries.** If you feel unwell or depleted without something or conversely, in the presence of something, it's a need or boundary. Of course, we're not children and we can't expect the world to cater to our exact comfort, but women tend to over accommodate. We run ourselves to depletion and accept behaviors that we needn't.

It may take a while to get clear on the lines. In fact, it's likely a lifelong journey. The key again is to notice. Is the lack of something depleting you? Can you remedy it? If you can, make it your sacred duty to honor that need and set boundaries to protect it. Others won't magically know what you need, nor will they provide your needs without you advocating for yourself. Basic needs are a place where you don't ask, you tell. Set a boundary and accept nothing less. You may feel guilty (*why* you may feel guilty while men typically don't is the topic of another article), but do it anyway.

Here's the kicker: it's hard work existing in a system not designed for your biology. It stresses your brain. It taxes your intellect. It depletes your body. Your number one job is to relentlessly advocate for your own well-being. So, meditate, sleep, spend time with loved ones and in nature, take time to play, eat well. Whatever builds bandwidth, do it.

- **Build a posse of support, both real and imaginary.** No one does it alone. Women in male-dominated industries can suffer from extreme isolation. Find your peeps and develop a strong support network. Asking for help isn't weak. It's smart. While actual connections are wonderful, we can also call upon a custom-built imaginary internal board of directors. I often ask Michelle Obama's advice or check my behavior against how RBG would perceive it. Having reference icons can help us proactively define how we want to show up in the world and disengage from the automatic assumptions of a masculine work environment.
- **Stop trying so hard to be liked.** It's difficult to disengage from this lifelong habit, especially when you belong to a group that's historically held lower power. The unfortunate truth is that being liked is hard work and often comes with little pay out. I'm not giving license to act like a jerk, but rather, the prioritization of garnering respect over being perceived as "pleasing."
- **Lastly, become an observer of the game.** How is the game of work defined? What rules are people playing by? Your job is to define your own game and to not blindly follow the rules set out for you, rules stacked against *your* androgen profile.

Across psychology and anthropology, we find repeating archetypes of human behavior. Largely absent in our culture is the feminine archetype of the Queen. The Queen is holder to the values

of the community. Her power is in her grace and unwavering conviction and commitment. Others serve her willingly, not through her domination, but in deference to the ideals she upholds. The Queen accepts help, support and care. She knows her worth and values her body, brain and spirit. Queens don't crush the competition or jockey for position, they hold court. They allow. They receive. They uplift. They create conditions for meaning and community. None of these qualities rely on testosterone, yet we recognize she who possesses them as the rarest of leaders. If we are to break out of the tyranny of testosterone, let us cultivate our inner queens.