



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

a challenge for our times

I have been a therapist for more than 30 years. Over that time I have consistently seen more women in therapy than men. I don't think that is because women are more disturbed than men; I think it is because women are more able and willing to seek help for their problems. Most women I see are troubled by anxiety and depression. They often feel unsure of themselves and inadequate in spite of ample proof that they are bright and competent.

While some anxiety and depression is due to genetic tendencies and individual personality issues, I believe much of it is a product of our culture. While we no longer burn unconventional women as witches, it is still dangerous to be a strong, assertive woman in this society. Whole books have been written about how this culture affects women in a negative way, so I cannot do the subject justice, but I think it is vital to raise it in an issue devoted to *Women's Health*.

Both men and women have traits traditionally labeled masculine or feminine. The problem comes when those traits are not equally valued—then the gender associated with the trait is also devalued and the benefits of those traits are largely lost to the society. Incalculable harm is done to both men and women when they are forced to conform to narrow gender stereotypes and incalculable harm has been done to our society because traditionally feminine characteristics have been devalued.

Children quickly learn that it is dangerous to go outside of stereotypical roles. The worst put-down a boy can suffer is to be told, "You are acting like a girl." To act like a girl is to be sensitive, gentle, kind, nurturing, in touch with emotions, willing to talk about problems, intuitive. To be feminine is to be seen as weak, illogical, and emotional.

For girls, being a "tomboy" is okay until middle and high school, then it becomes unattractive—the social kiss of death for girls. The increase in eating disorders and cosmetic surgery testifies to the extremes to which women will go to conform to societal standards. Disparities in power in the workplace, government, and even religious organizations are obvious; and our little girls absorb the message that they are second-class citizens. Rape and domestic violence are the most graphic examples of the hatred of women in this society.

Women are not the only victims in our patriarchal society. Our society suffers from the lopsided emphasis on traditionally

male hierarchical power structures that emphasize competition, dominance and subjugation over power structures that emphasize cooperation and the quality of relationships and draw on the wisdom of everyone in the group.

Men are victims as well. Woe to the man who isn't muscular, athletic, competitive, and bold. Because men are not allowed to show their vulnerability, they do not learn to talk about their problems as women do. While women suffer economically and politically, men die sooner because the stress of being a man in this society is deadly. Disproportionately more men are killed in wars that might be avoided if cooperation and negotiation were valued as highly as competition and dominance.

Finally the environment suffers. Until we understand that the earth needs to be cared for rather than simply subjugated, "Mother Earth" will continue to deteriorate to the point that life as we know it will no longer be sustainable.

We need to complete the efforts begun by women in the 1960s: strong men and women united to bring about a world where traditionally feminine characteristics are valued equally with masculine characteristics. We need to work toward a society where men and women are able to develop their own unique gifts without fear of being ostracized. We need workplaces that are caring, cooperative, supportive, and effective environments. We need different corporate and political structures that support human values equally with military goals. We need a world where the environment is protected.

Until both genders are valued equally, our society will suffer from people being less than whole. The changes needed are monumental and on a daily basis it is easy to be overwhelmed by the problems. However, each of us can do our part. Individual women can develop strong voices and expect to be treated with respect. Individual men can develop their relationship skills and shed the stresses that are killing them. We will not live to see these radical societal changes, but in the words of Mother Theresa, our task is not to be successful, but to be faithful in doing what we can so that perhaps our grandchildren will grow up truly free to be who they are meant to be. ❧❧

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