CELEBRATING THE UNIQUE QUALITIES OF WOMEN

Besides the obvious differences in 'lumps' and 'bumps', with men apparently coming from Mars and women from Venus, there are unique differences between the genders.

ON AVERAGE WOMEN LIVE ALMOST 8% LONGER THAN MEN

In the 1920s, men typically died one year before women, by 2005 the life expectancy gender gap had grown to 5.2 years. There is evidence that men's life expectancy has always been lower than that of women, but that gap is still increasing. In South Africa, the current life expectancy for men is 60.2, while for women it is 67 years.

LONGEVITY – BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Women do have a chromosomal biological advantage. With their two "X" chromosomes, even if a mutation on one of them occurs, women have a second one to compensate. In addition to this, oestrogen, the female sex hormone, offers health protection to the heart and cardio-vascular system.

AND WHEN IT COMES TO 'TALKING' – WOMEN HAVE ANOTHER BIG ADVANTAGE

This does not endorse the stereotypical image of women talking more than men; they're simply better communicators. Women are good listeners, better at displaying empathy, and therefore enjoy stronger social connections. Better social support reduces the risk for major depression. Although depression affects women more than men, research suggests that men tend to talk differently, or often not at all, about their symptoms of depression.

A FURTHER KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IS RISK, AND HEALTH-AWARE BEHAVIOUR

Testosterone increases aggressiveness, resulting in higher death rate from accidents and violent incidents. This may also play a role in risk assessment. Whilst women tend to overestimate risk of any type, men consistently underestimate it.

In general, studies show women to be more health conscious, have higher awareness of their physical and mental symptoms, and consequently to follow an overall healthier lifestyle. Men, for example, are more likely to smoke and to abuse alcohol.

Most importantly, research suggests that women are more likely to talk to, and seek help from health professionals than men. They respond more sensitively to problems such as noticing lumps and bumps in their breasts, or experiencing anxiety and depression. The common reason cited for this difference is 'traditional masculine behaviour'.

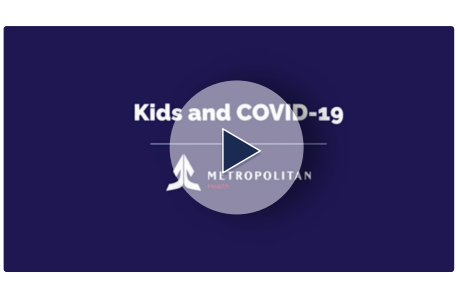
Aside from biology, many of these differences between men and women are acquired from learned gender roles. Men are conditioned to be self-reliant, not to openly display their emotions and seek assistance in times of need. Since this could be seen as a sign of weakness associated with femininity, it strongly conflicts the masculine identity.

This type of stigma restricts men's willingness to seek help, reduces treatment compliance, and deters men from confiding in friends and family. Consequently, men are more likely to seek professional help only after a serious health event or when they are no longer able to function in their work or personal environment.

CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES, BUT REMEMBER THAT STEREOTYPES HARM EVERYONE

So, whilst there are indeed clear differences between men and women, let's not confuse 'differences' with 'deficiencies' regarding longevity. Women do have unique habits that encourage a healthier lifestyle. This can be celebrated and embraced, but not at the expense of reinforcing gender stereotypes. Everyone, regardless of gender, should feel empowered and motivated to prioritise their mental and physical wellbeing. That is the very definition of the World Health Organisation's stated goal of achieving 'Health for All'.

Click on the links below to watch our Wellness videos's



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