

DILEMMAS

Women naturally 'tend and befriend'



SUSAN PINKER
PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

I am in a stressful job at a stressful period. It's evaluation time, when next year's contract renewals and salary levels are decided. There's a gloomy atmosphere as people wait to see where the axe will fall. I would like to commiserate and share war stories with the group of female colleagues who regularly exercise and eat lunch together. But I wonder whether I should just keep my anxieties to myself, and not ask any questions.

--Chicken Licken

Dear Chicken:

Coping with stress by checking up on those in your circle is a natural impulse, especially for women. It might look like gossip but it's really a protective mechanism that damps down stress responses, the very ones making you feel anxious as you consider the unknown.

It's been tagged the "tend-and-befriend" response by UCLA psychology professor Shelley Taylor, who, along with colleagues, published a landmark paper six years ago suggesting that women have different stress reactions than men.

Along with the classic fight-or-flight response -- when adrenaline readies the body to attack a predator or run for its life -- women who feel threatened are also primed to look after their children and friends through a flood of internally generated hormones and painkillers that have calming effects.

At the first sign of potential harm, these chemicals infuse the neural circuitry underlying maternal attachment and affiliation, prompting a reaching out to others and a strengthening of prior connections. Such gestures promoted the survival of mutually dependent infants and mothers living in groups in primitive societies, and, luckily, have lasted in our genetic signatures until now.

I say luckily because it is exactly this tend-and-befriend mechanism that kicked into gear when a gunman strafed crowds of young students with automatic gunfire in Montreal last Wednesday. Not only at Dawson College but in offices everywhere, people reached out to each other for reassurance and to check on the safety of others.

Indeed, almost as soon as the crisis began, my phone and e-mail systems came alive as female friends and journalists from across the country tried to make contact. They were checking to see if my college-aged kids were okay. And they were reducing their anxieties -- and mine -- by reinforcing pre-existing bonds. One far-flung male friend from my college days called to check in, too, and the cumulative effect was that we all felt a little less naked confronting a threat we could not control.

Your work situation is a lot less dire, but the same physiological stress responses are at play. Sharing information among you will reduce feelings of isolation and the beleaguered sense that one of you is being singled out for bad treatment. Forging social connections is so elementally linked to our survival that Prof. Taylor thinks it's like other primal appetites, say hunger, thirst or sex, that drive human behaviour and are constantly adjusted through internal thermostats.

But a caveat is in order. Not everything "natural" is good. Not all female networks are stress-free or stress reducing -- and without careful handling of confidential information, members of your lunch group could feel exposed or manipulated by a gripe-fest. Tend-and-befriend efforts offer mental health benefits, but only as long as they're infused with good will.

Dear Susan:

As a long-time employee and shareholder of a small family owned company, I have a disturbing family business challenge.

An aging, semi-retired family member in our company, determined to keep his independent lifestyle, recently fell asleep at the wheel of his car. Luckily, he did no damage to himself or anyone else. He just wrecked his car, which was secretly repaired.

My conundrum has to do with the fact that family and business associates who know the details have been asked to keep it secret by our elderly family member so he can keep his driver's licence. But from both a family and business perspective, not to mention future liability, are we not ethically obliged to inform the authorities to prevent a future accident with far more serious consequences?

A lawyer friend suggested I would only alienate family and friends by speaking up, creating long term-problems for me in the business. Your advice, please.

--Dad's The Word

Dear Dad,

You're in an uncomfortable spot but you have to speak up. The people to talk to are the family member who had the accident and his doctor, who can assess his skills.

Physicians hate to take away their patients' car keys, almost as much as family members do, and for the same reasons. It strains the mutual trust that builds up over many years of interaction, as well as the

assumption that certain medical facts will be kept secret. But with family in particular, after so much shared history, denial can creep in -- even more so if other age-related issues have knocked the patient down a peg or two.

But you must speak up because the statistics are chilling. The American Medical Association reports that car crashes are the leading cause of injury-related death in people over 65. The fatality rate for drivers 85 and over is nine times higher than for drivers between the ages of 25 and 69.

As deaths and injuries from car crashes have dropped among the general population

in recent years, the rates for those over 65 have climbed, Dr. Shawn Marshall, an associate professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Ottawa, writes in a Canadian Medical Association publication.

Even if there's no national evaluation and reporting system, most provinces require doctors to report patients who may have medical conditions that affect their driving, and neglecting to do so may leave a doctor legally liable for any accidents that involve his or her patients as drivers, according to Dr. Marshall.

Your business may incur liability too, if your family member has an accident while working or driving a company car.

All of these reasons, combined with your sixth sense that your family member is at risk, should compel you to challenge the status quo by seeking a professional medical assessment. Another resource is the CanDrive website (<http://www.candrive.ca>), which incorporates research and tips on safe ways to keep older drivers independent and driving when appropriate.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
Copyright Susan Pinker 2006
