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bodymind

MORE THAN JUST A SPAT

Hostile arguing may compromise a woman's immune function.

Many people believe that a good fight between a man and a woman can clear the air. New research, though, has found that chronic acrimonious arguing has physiological effects. Even after partners have made amends, the battle may rage on from within, elevating stress hormones and compromising immunity. For the woman, that is; not the man.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, investigators at Ohio State University's Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research invited 90 newlywed couples into a lab to discuss a topic known to be a source of conflict between them. Throughout the day, blood pressure was measured and blood samples were taken. Contrary to expectations that the men's blood pressure would soar, women's blood pressure rose most. In a bizarre biological discrimination, women also experienced a dramatic surge in such stress hormones as cortisol and norepinephrine. By the next day, their white blood cell count was down, indicating immune function had deteriorated. In contrast, the majority of men remained physiologically unaffected.

The researchers duplicated their findings with older couples married an average of 42 years. This is a particularly worrisome result, since immunity invariably declines with age—and flu and pneu-



Chronic acrimonious arguing seems to take more of a toll on women than on men, raising blood pressure and weakening the body.

monia combined are the fifth leading cause of death in the elderly. "There may have been no serious health consequences for our young female newlyweds," acknowledges Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, Ph.D., the lead investigator. "But for older women, hostile and chronic conflict might mean the difference between sickness and health."

In both studies, one style of arguing was found to have particularly damaging long-term consequences for women:

STOP THE SPARRING

- Don't respond to negativity in kind. If your partner shouts, "I can't stand all your dirty dishes in the kitchen," don't scream back, "What about all the dirty clothes you leave around the house?" Address the original objection.
- Avoid character assassination. Calling your partner a lazy slob (even if it's true) only escalates an argument.
- Speak in a calm voice and your partner will be less likely to respond defensively.
- Offer possible solutions to your problems.

the common male withdrawing/female demanding pattern, in which men respond to hostility by avoidance or denial, while women escalate their demands and accusations. Women's bodies may be more sensitive to negative interactions. Yet when the couples in the two studies resolved conflicts constructively, the women did not suffer ill effects. —Kathleen McAuliffe

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT, ANNA PALMA, NATHAN BILOW/ALLSPORT, ROSS WHITAKER/IMAGE BANK, DAVIES & STARR; BOTTOM, MICHELLE MCCABE. HAIR AND MAKEUP, LETHA RODMAN. SHIRT, TIE AND JACKET, COUNTRY ROAD. TURTLENECK, ISABEL ARDEE. SWEATER, URCHIN.