

Wonder Woman syndrome

Forget the Superwoman analogy, **women are taking on more and more roles and heading for burnout.** Do you find yourself wondering if you're doing the right things and **are these the right things for you?**

By Joanne Moss



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onder Woman syndrome is associated with women who are juggling multiple and often conflicting roles – super mom, super wife, super daughter, super sister, super friend, super career woman, super homemaker, super colleague, super competitor. In addition, she's usually a perfectionist, overachiever and people-pleaser. Wonder women are constantly doing more and giving more in the hope of achieving more, making a good impression, and often attempting to make the impossible possible so that they're rewarded and recognised. What they neglect to do is feature themselves on the list of priorities.

Where does this syndrome come from?

In my experience, Wonder Woman syndrome has its roots in low self-esteem and self-worth, and a negative core belief (usually unconscious) that's developed over time. The thoughts behind this are

- If I'm a good girl, I'm accepted, acceptable and lovable
- If I'm perfect, I'm respected, valued and worthy
- I'm successful if and when ...

Self-worth thereby becomes measured in productivity and accomplishments, rather than by how you've made a difference or touched someone's life in a meaningful way.

The recent rise of the syndrome is thanks to expectations that we place on ourselves based on the perceived and explicit expectations of others, such as parents, friends, work colleagues/employees and society (influenced by media). There's also demand and pressure to be the best

at work with clients and colleagues, at home with parents, partners and children, as well as the community as a whole. But what is the best? How is it measured and who's the judge?

What are the consequences?

The consequences of Wonder Woman syndrome can be enormous – both on a physical and emotional level. The primary consequence is stress, which is not a feeling, but rather the body's reaction to threat, called the fight or flight response. Chronic stress is a gradual spiral that develops quietly. That's why it's called the "silent killer". Usually the process unfolds like this

- **Guilt sets in** You start thinking, *I can't do everything or I have so much to do and no time – everybody wants something from me.* All the while, friends are wondering why they don't see you anymore

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- **Frustration rises** because, even though you're fulfilling all your responsibilities, there are still demands on your time – so enough is not enough
- **Irritation mounts** because no matter how hard you try and how much you do, you don't seem to get on top of everything – so you don't feel a sense of accomplishment, because there's always something else or something more to be done, and there seems to be no end in sight
- **Resentment builds up** as there's no time to "breathe" or to have "me time". Everyone seems to be taking and not giving or even recognising that you're overloaded and overwhelmed. You feel taken for granted
- **Discontentment and unhappiness set in** You're unhappy with the situation because you're not getting on top of things and now your loved ones are unhappy too
- **The stress spiral gains momentum** Blood vessels constrict; blood pressure rises; you breathe faster and stress hormone (adrenalin and cortisol) levels increase. This results in insufficient oxygen and nutrient distribution around your body and an increase in acid levels, which can cause the following symptoms
 - **Emotional** Feeling overwhelmed and out of control; having difficulty quieting the mind and relaxing; feeling bad about yourself, low self-esteem, worthlessness and loneliness
 - **Cognitive** Memory loss; loss of mental clarity and low concentration; anxiety and depression; excessive worrying
 - **Behavioural** Mood swings; weight gain or loss; angry outbursts; withdrawal; procrastination; nail biting, fidgeting, developing ticks, pacing; increased use of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and other stimulants
 - **Physical** Heart disease; diabetes; migraines/headaches; obesity; gastrointestinal problems; Alzheimer's; accelerated ageing; impaired fertility; premature death.

Is taking on too much worth it?

The overwhelming number of things you're trying to accomplish can come at a very high price to you and your loved ones. If you succumb to the devastating effects of stress, you become a statistic, and without you, everything you've tried to achieve is meaningless.

You have the choice between prioritising the practical "to do's" and the emotional "to be's". We often put emotions and matters of the heart on hold because they require time, and because "we need to get stuff done" and "there's not enough time". The "to do's" may give you a sense of success, but the "to be's" will give you a sense of fulfilment, satisfaction and significance.

My advice is to focus on doing a few things well and meaningfully. As described in *The Art of Living* (www.artofliving.org.za), living from your heart is an art. It takes creativity, focus and time.

When you're at the centre of your heart you know you're home. **HI**



Are you a Wonder Woman?

(If you agree with several of these, then you probably are)

- *I can't say no*
- *I need to feel in control and do it all*
- *I put others' needs before my own*
- *I take on more and more responsibility*
- *I need to be perfect in everything*
- *I'm overwhelmed by my "to do" list*
- *I want to be all things to all people*
- *I value myself by my productivity.*

10 ways to change your pattern

It requires discipline and commitment to do something different – as Einstein said: "You cannot solve today's challenges with yesterday's mindset". Keeping this in mind, aim to

- **Make time** *Put a non-negotiable time aside for yourself each day to do something for you – even if it's a simple coffee in the garden to enjoy the sunrise*
- **Prioritise your "to do" list** *– not everything is important or critical*
- **Manage your deadlines** *by making them realistic and managing others' expectations – rather under-promise and over-deliver*
- **Live in the present** *The past brings up guilt and the future builds anxiety*
- **Learn to say NO** *It's not a swear word or a form of disrespect. It's pure honesty and forms the foundation*

for healthy boundaries. You're not a magician – you're respecting yourself and teaching others how to treat you

- **Breathe deeply and slowly** *– it calms you down*
- **Practise yoga and meditation** *These bring inner balance, calm and clarity*
- **Eat nutritious food** *Vegetables, nuts, fish, power fruits and salads. Avoid sugar, carbohydrates and stimulants – they add to your stress levels. If you're under-nourished, your body isn't firing on all cylinders, as it's not being replenished*
- **Try reflexology** *or other therapies like massage to reduce stress levels. A recent case study I completed showed that stress levels were reduced by up to 25% in women classified as Wonder Women using strategies such as these*
- **Create new neural pathways** *If you're stuck in a rut, neurolinguistic programming (NLP/HNLP) can help you to create new patterns of behaviour and overcome negative core beliefs.*

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www.joannemoss.com *If you are looking for a therapeutic reflexologist in your area, please visit Allied Health Professions Council of South Africa*
www.ahpcs.co.za

References available on request