

## Some Benefits of Developing our Friendships with other Women

### *at work ...*

... Having supportive relationships with other women at work (helps women) keep their **balance and grounding** in the face of unconscious bias, subtle gender discrimination, and the challenges of balancing work and family life. ... These relationships provide support, validation, mentoring, and empowerment—all of which have been shown to be essential to women's mental and emotional health in male-dominated work environments.

*Anne Litwin, New Rules for Women: Revolutionizing the Way Women Work Together*

[There are significant] benefits to women's **mental and emotional health** that result from having the support of other women in the workplace.

*Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver*

Of the women who were well-connected with peers, those who *also* had an inner circle of close female contacts with non-overlapping networks landed executive positions with **2.5x greater authority and pay** than the women without a female-dominated inner circle.\* (\*Summary)  
2019, Yang, Chawla & Uzzi

When a CEO, Corporate Board Member or (Latin American) President is female, **more women are appointed to top leadership** positions. And, when women negotiate on behalf of other women, they are able to **boost their own salaries**, too.

2016, Sandberg & Grant, NYTimes

### *and in general ...*

When women feel emotionally close to other women, their bodies **produce more progesterone, boosting mood and alleviating stress**.

*University of Michigan 2009, Hormones and Behavior*

A network of women friends can provide **support and understanding** about shared life experiences as women, that a male partner cannot provide. In fact, because no one person can ever meet all of our needs, women married to women also need to maintain their network of women friends to keep themselves and their relationships **balanced and healthy**.

*Rebecca Traister, New York Times*

Adult women's friendships outside of work help us **stay upright** in the face of life's challenges.

*Ruthellen Josselson and Terri Apter*

As women connect they **help each other act and change**, which is essential for **psychological development**. Women come to know themselves, each other, and the world around them through the exchanges they have with each other.

Women under stress release the hormone oxytocin, which buffers the fight or flight response and encourages her to tend children and **gather with other women**. When she engages in this "tending and befriending" ... **more oxytocin** is released, which further **counters stress and produces a calming effect**. This calming response does not occur in men.

*UCLA, Klein and Taylor*

## “The Fabric of Internalized Sexism”

Excerpts from Bearman, Korobov, & Thorne, Journal of Integrated Social Sciences, 2009

45 pairs of female friends (age 18-25) were observed in 10-minute open “catch-up” conversations. The conversations suggest that internalized sexism can be routine practice in women’s dialogues. **On average:**

### **General ignorance claims** occurred every 90 seconds

A claim of knowledge, followed/discounted by “I don’t know”. This is different from not knowing.

### **Invalidation and derogation** (every 5 minutes)

Suggestions that a woman’s thoughts, opinions, interests, feelings, reactions, or responses are invalid. Self-invalidating (“What did I do wrong?”, “I was so pathetic”), invalidation of friend (“Who cares?”, “You’re so weird”), or of other women (“Why does she always do that?” “That evil psycho girl”).

### **Assertions of incompetence** (every 8 minutes)

A woman’s desires cannot be reached due to lack of skill, experience, or power (“I’m so stupid”, “I’d be bad at that”) (“They didn’t let me”).

### **Construction of women as Competitor or Object** (every 12 minutes)

- Placement of other women into the win/lose role of outsider and competitor  
or

- References to self, friend, or other women on the basis of physical/visual attributes; frequently sexualizing the body or comparing to an external standard. Often, descriptors such as personality characteristics, behavior, or relationship to the speaker would have served just as well.

### **Competitive banter, usually playful** (every 16 minutes)

Attempts to one-up each other, put each other down, or push the friend into lower status positions.

## **Conclusions:**

Sexism disempowers women. Internalized feelings of powerlessness can result, diminishing women’s belief in their ability to do or get what they desire. It can preoccupy women with their physical appearance, make women question the validity of their judgments and feelings, and convince women that they and other women are to blame for the effects of sexism.

A sense of power or a feeling of being more substantial can come from catching oneself in the act of saying “I don’t know,” inhibiting the general ignorance claim before it can be spoken.

## **By recognizing and thwarting internalized sexism as it arises in thoughts & words, women can:**

- **stop discounting** their intelligence and capabilities
- **empower other women** by not colluding with their assertions of incompetence
- come to **accept their bodies** as they already are, **shifting their focus** away from judgment and toward the felt sense experience of embodiment
- **validate** the **opinions and feelings** of themselves and of the women around them, **refusing to participate** in the derogation of their fellow women, and
- **learn to support and become allies** to other women in overcoming the effects of sexism, instead of falling prey to the belief that other women should be treated as competitors.

**Empowerment, embodiment, validation, and collaboration are all potential benefits of learning about internalized sexism.**