

Local

Superwomen have their kryptonite, too

By: Tara Maltman-Just

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One week ago was Mother's Day -- the day of the year when the special women in our lives are celebrated for what they do year-round. So, as we're enjoying our long weekend -- cottaging, shopping, planting and praying for frost-free nights -- let's not overlook that there might be people in our lives who can still benefit from that extra attention.

Mothers, and women in general, often focus on fulfilling the needs of others first. Whether it's caring for that newborn disrupting a peaceful sleep, chauffeuring children to elementary school, seeing their teenager off to college or caring for their own elderly mother while carving out time to babysit their grandchildren, they're inclined to say "yes," and to do so jubilantly. It's one trait that makes them so revered and affectionately referred to as real-life superwomen.

But what happens come the end of the day, when the Superwoman cape comes off? The truth is, although she may be the last to admit it, her steadfast service to others can take a toll on her own health. In fact, it might be her kryptonite.

In my practice, I see many women who push themselves to the max. It's on the job, it's in the home, and it's in their DNA. There can be a sense of guilt if they're feeling tired, or burned out, or unable to cope. In fact, so much so, many women I meet may purposely refrain from sharing their concerns with their loved ones because they don't wish to burden them.

Take the example of the woman helping her mother with dementia move to a care home -- hard but necessary, nonetheless. Staying so calm -- now that's a superpower. Or the woman who feels depressed, yet won't tell her husband for fear it will take his focus off his growing business. Or the divorced mom whose daughter just got married and moved away, an empty-nester facing a migratory flight like the Canada geese, but with a destination unknown. While moms are smiling and encouraging you (which they mean wholeheartedly), it can be hard to see past that shiny cape.

If you look a little closer, though, you might find they too need someone to fly to their rescue. And that person may be you. You can listen, and you will see. It's not a bird and it's not a plane -- it's the woman you love. They need to know it's OK to focus on themselves at times, too. The concept of person-centred care is a newer principle among health-care practitioners, and one I'm hopeful will become more mainstream. This means treatments are tailored to the individual's personal needs and goals and is the cornerstone of my practice. In this scenario, it also means a woman's health starts with her willingness to say "yes" to herself, even if it means occasionally saying "no" to others' expectations.

Why, you ask? The impact of stress on the body is undeniable from a physiologic perspective. I often meet patients who say they have no stress, only to tell me they have been sleeping four hours a night while working overtime to make ends meet after they took time off work for several surgeries in the last few years. Here's a not-so-startling news flash: Your body considers that a stress. Even if you're coping well now, stresses have a cumulative impact. Thankfully, you can find help. And you don't have to do it alone. You may have a Superman, Supergirl or clinician willing to step in and support you. All you need to do is ask.

Now that the overcast skies of early May have lifted, we can feel the sun's warmth, like our mothers', feed our foundation and help us grow. With clearer skies and a clearer focus, we'll see her soar again like the Superwoman she is. The sun is shining, and it's time to return the favour.

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Superwoman mom

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