

Chapter 1 Why Don't More Women Make It to the Top?

I asked a dozen high-achieving Corporate America women who've watched less-experienced men get promoted over them, "Why don't more women make it to the top?" I got a dozen different answers.

"We've been programmed by society to believe that there's a safe limit to how much money and position a woman can aspire to."

"If I climb to higher positions within corporate, I become more visible. I become a bigger target."

"The money is a big issue. Many women still believe that men won't want them if they make more money."

"It can feel 'too hard' for women when all we see is a sea of white hair . . . and penises. Is it worth it to fight the good fight?"

"Women are not encouraged to pursue powerful roles in well-paying industries."

"Women are not interested in playing the bullshit politics games it takes to win."

"We can't climb as quickly when we're taking twelve to eighteen months away per kid. A sad reality."

"Women's own perceptions are holding us back. We don't 'think' we can achieve what we want to because we 'think' we need to put our child's needs/husband's needs/insert others' needs first."

"We sideline our dreams rather than taking the wheel. Years of oppression have hindered our perception of our ability not just to live but to thrive. Historically, our place was to be the support for someone else to 'shine.'"

"We don't feel like we're enough. Not good enough. Not smart enough. Not fast enough."

"We think being empathetic comes across as 'weak,' when in fact the best CEOs are the most empathetic."

"It's incredibly tribal at the top and often lonely. There are so few strong female role models who care deeply about creating opportunities for every woman looking to narrate a career."

Each answer is correct because each experience is real. Maybe you've witnessed discrimination in your own workplace. Maybe you hear echoes of your own story in these answers. There are very few female professionals who don't bare bruises from crashing into the glass ceiling.

But there is one answer to that question I've never heard. It heavily plays into why women hold only [20 percent](#) of executive, senior officer, and management positions and why less than [5 percent](#) of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. I've found this answer to be the common thread tying the women I work with who stand proudly at the top to the ones who struggle—or have even decided the sacrifice was too great.

This problem is just as pernicious and pervasive as outright hiring and promotion bias. In fact, it's even worse than many of the systemic disadvantages because it's universal among all women. We can't move one cubicle away from the offender. We can't write an anonymous tell-all to Human Resources. No diversity program or antibias training calls it out either.

It's the one problem we don't talk about, yet it's the one women have the most control over: our hormones.

Yes, hormones! But I'm not talking about PMS or the mood swings we think we have no control over. I'm talking about the hormones directly connected to stress, infertility, anxiety, depression, and—ultimately—a lack of self-worth.

When I worked on Bay Street, I saw firsthand how driven, high-achieving type A female executives like me work as hard as any of the men in the most high-pressure corporate environments in Canada. I also noticed how we prioritized ourselves last. Recognize this routine?

A muffin and coffee for breakfast, ignoring hunger cues to work through lunch in an effort to get home at a decent hour, and skipping our exercise class for a conference call with a client in a different time zone.

We finally get home after dark and clock in at our second job of parenting and household duties. “Mommy guilt” has us burning the candle at both ends. After reading bedtime stories, doing the entire family's laundry, and packing everyone's lunch, we're wired . . . yet tired. We fall asleep a few hours after our partners do, then wake up feeling exhausted to get the kids ready for the day, often by ourselves.

Then, somehow, we charge back into the office, ready to fight the good fight, fueled by sugar, caffeine, and motivation to outperform the men—so maybe, just maybe, we'll earn the same salaries they do someday.

As an impressionable twentysomething paralegal studying for her LSAT test (who thought she always wanted to step into this world), I can tell you that reality was less than motivating. My coworkers, mostly articling students or young lawyers, vented their frustrations during the rare free moments between meetings. In some cases, they didn't have to. Since the day I started, I saw many women I considered mentors crash and burn out. Most sacrificed their youth, some their marriages or dreams of having children, and all of them their health to varying degrees clawing their way up the corporate ladder. All they had to show for it were symptoms of hormones gone wild. Everything from adrenal fatigue and chronic insomnia to thyroid disease and obesity . . . and worse!

We were all taught that if we just aimed high enough, if we just hustled hard enough, and if we just sacrificed enough, we'd get where we wanted to be. As a transactional securities law clerk with a bull's-eye on that 20 percent of female corporate leadership, I busted my butt working alongside high-achieving women partners recognized all across Canada. I saw their struggle. I saw how hard they worked. Those who pushed themselves too hard from the get-go burned out too quickly and never made it to the coveted "equity partner" goal. Often they took a massive pay cut to go in-house, and many still gave it all up to stay at home with their kids, believing there was no way they could have both.

I also saw those at the top of their game. Ultimately, they were the ones who were unapologetic about taking care of themselves first—women others may describe as having little emotion and strong masculine energy. I remember one particular partner at the Bay Street law firm I worked at in the early 2000s. She always took care of herself. Never a week passed when I didn't see her at the gym with her personal trainer. She hired a chef to make her special lunches instead of eating basic sandwiches the firm supplied, like everyone else ate. She asked about my smoothie-making routine often. (Yes, I was making smoothies in 2000—long before I was a nutritionist and smoothies were a "thing"!) She also bettered herself professionally, learning to get things done without sacrificing her health.

But examples like her are few and far between. And what do those of us who don't have the money to delegate these tasks do to manage our lives? Racked by guilt, we say yes to almost

every request and responsibility. We let down our boundaries, which costs us our energy, our health, and that coveted spot at the top of our game. Within a few short years, I lost my desire to follow that path. In fact, I did what happens all too often. I married a partner at the firm, had a baby, and never walked back into a law firm again.

My Story

Before I got pregnant, I weighed just 115 pounds. And like many of my female coworkers, I put enormous pressure on myself to be perfect. I'd go to the gym at 6:00 a.m. every morning, throw an evening spin class in for good measure before heading back to the office, eat clean five days a week, and then binge on the weekend. If I ate something unhealthy on my clean-eating days, I'd throw it back up and chug a protein shake instead. I ate low-cal, sugar-free foods and obsessed over what I looked like in the mirror.

But after the pregnancy test came up positive, the pressure was too great. I was soon on “stress leave” from work—and stayed on leave. Lonely, in the middle of a nasty Canadian winter, and with the threat of SARS looming if I walked out the door, I let myself go. I figured people couldn't judge me for piling on the pounds anymore, so I stopped watching what I ate. I quit exercising completely. I binged on greasy junk food instead, shit that I wouldn't have eaten otherwise—french fries, burgers, pasta, ice cream, you name it. Goodbye, green smoothies! Little did I know how the choices I made then would impact me, my marriage, and my ability to be the best mom I could be in the future. I didn't understand how much poor food choices could affect not only my physical health but also my mental health and ultimately how I felt about myself.

Two weeks after I gave birth to my daughter, I still weighed around 160 pounds. I had zero energy. I felt like a terrible mother. One night, as I held my screaming baby in my arms, I broke down. All I could think about was how much I wanted my old life back (and my old body, for that matter). And so I tried. I tried everything in my power to lose the weight. I clocked countless hours of cardio, I cut out carbs completely, and I tried every fad diet I saw advertised.

I lost some weight . . . but I still didn't feel good. Instead I felt deprived, and I constantly craved the foods I'd obliterated from my diet. Not to mention the fact that I still hated what I saw in the mirror. To make a long story short—I felt like a failure.

So I set out on a mission to research and rethink everything I knew about health and wellness. When my daughter turned one in 2004, I headed back to school to become a nutritionist. Educating myself on health and nutrition was a game changer for me. It gave me my power back. I finally felt in control of what I ate and how I felt. And food didn't control me anymore.

In 2008, I leveraged what little equity I had in my home and opened two weight-loss clinics. As a single mom working twelve to fourteen hours a day with ten employees, I quickly found myself grappling with a huge amount of stress. I had zero time, but nutrition was my rock—and I still managed to squeeze in a twenty- to forty-five-minute high-intensity interval training (HIIT) workout at home five days a week by following BodyRockTV videos. I adored how physically strong, confident, and balanced this exercise made me feel. My business was very much dependent on me walking the walk and staying on top of my mind-set. I listened repeatedly to motivational books like *Think and Grow Rich* on my thirty-minute-plus drive to and from the clinics each day. There is no way I could have survived the impact that the 2008 financial crisis had on my business without nutrition, exercise, and those audio books.

The real test of my new lifestyle came when I became pregnant with my second daughter in 2011. I felt scared and alone, but I continued to do what I knew how to do—I ate exactly the same (or a little more when I needed to), and I listened to my body.

Despite having awful morning sickness—and no energy for the first twelve weeks—I was determined to keep exercising. Nutrition was something I lived and breathed, but exercise was where I knew I needed accountability. I hired personal trainer Johannah Jackson (a mom with four kids of her own) to kick my butt into shape twice a week by applying the same HIIT principles that got me fit after baby number one.

With HIIT, I could get more done in less time, plus I felt better as a result! Gone were the days when eating healthy and exercising was about “looking” a certain way. I was no longer obsessed with being thin. Instead, I continued to focus on being healthy. I knew that if I was going to hold it together for my daughter and my new baby, I'd have to keep my mental health in check—and I knew what I ate was the key. Instead of binging on junk food, I was craving kale—I shit you not! I gained just under twenty-five pounds and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. And, within a few weeks of giving birth, I dropped most of that weight.

Since then, I've come into my own. It's amazing how adversity can have a profound positive impact on your life, if you allow it to. Today, I'm a better person and a better mother. Eating right and moving my body has become easier and easier as the years have gone by. Now I choose to work with other Bay Street professionals, founders, and entrepreneurs so I can help support the women I looked up to and teach them the hacks I learned along the way. After all, it was on Bay Street where I learned that painful lesson—as women, even if we achieve what we want on the outside, we suffer deeply on the inside when we neglect our health. And when we do that, we can't achieve the next thing. We just don't have the energy! In the push to work just as hard as the men—or harder—we sacrifice self-care. We haven't learned how much our overachieving, multitasking lifestyle affects our hormones and, in turn, how hormonal imbalances can ruin our lives—and our careers. If only we brought our hormones into balance, everything else would follow.

Sixteen years after leaving corporate, I teach fellow type A women how to do exactly that. It starts with saying yes to yourself first, not with creating a to-do list. I coach my clients to not only love themselves more but to make the kind of lifestyle choices that stick—choices that guarantee they won't lose themselves or their health on their way to the top. As a result, they walk away feeling healthy and rejuvenated—not perpetually exhausted and resentful. Prioritizing the right things gives us energy, balance, rest, and inspiration—all of which help us excel where it matters.

You first, everything else second, third, fourth, and so on. And just because you can do everything else doesn't mean you should. [Empirical evidence shows women](#) are naturally better at multitasking than men, an example of our biological gender differences. But did you know that multitasking alone increases the stress hormone cortisol? Elevated cortisol levels lead directly to increased belly fat, violent mood swings, high blood pressure, persistent acne, irregular periods, and fertility problems and can even be the underlying reason for anxiety and depression. In other words, if you're gunning for an executive, senior officer, or management role, cortisol can be as tough a barrier to promotion as systemic bias. And cortisol is just one of the hormones released by the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis.

Human females, like most female mammals, have a higher resting level of stress hormones than men. That means if you took a saliva sample from a man and a woman on an

airplane flight and looked at both samples at the exact same time, the woman's sample would always have higher levels of cortisol.

Neuroscientist Kim Hellemans (a lifelong friend) tested this hypothesis in real life. At Carleton University, she once asked several graduate students to stand up in front of their class and perform a difficult task, such as solving a math problem or giving a speech on a topic they knew nothing about. When she took saliva samples from both male and female participants an hour after the task, she found the peak cortisol response higher in all the women compared to the men.

Cortisol doesn't just spike in response to stress. Like other hormones, cortisol naturally fluctuates up and down during the day. It rises first thing in the morning, then slowly drops back down. Cortisol reaches its lowest point around three in the afternoon, which is why so many of us feel like grabbing a coffee and a chocolate bar to satisfy the midday munchies, since cortisol is part of what gives us our "get up and go." Then over the next few hours, cortisol rises once more before finally falling again at bedtime. In women, these cortisol high points are higher compared to men, and the low points are lower.

So why the big difference between men and women? Throughout human history, women evolved into the primary caregiver role—carrying, birthing, and feeding our children—while the men hunted and gathered. Surrounded by predators and threats, women developed cortisol-fueled hypervigilance to ensure the survival of our species.

But evolution isn't perfect. Higher cortisol levels come with a higher risk of heart disease, strokes, and psychiatric disorders. Women are twice as likely to receive a major depressive or anxiety disorder diagnosis as men. Of course, we tend to be more willing to seek help than men, so we're more likely to schedule a doctor's appointment if we feel "off."

We also have monthly estrogen and progesterone fluctuations that men do not. From puberty through the childbearing years to menopause, our natural hormone swings also increase the chance of major diseases if we don't intentionally bring our hormones into balance. Our HPA axis—the neural circuit that's activated when we're stressed—"talks" to our reproductive hormones. That's why women with chronic stress at work also have irregular menstrual cycles and have a hard time getting pregnant. Imagine our ancestors thousands of years ago running from predators on foot. Imagine their high stress levels! Not the best time to be pregnant.

Now imagine a type A lawyer, the only female in the boardroom. Her ancient instincts means survival comes first. She'll do whatever it takes to succeed. And she pays a steep price. Despite men and women facing similar pressures at work, women are prone to symptoms of burnout in a way men are not. Men tend to be better at taking care of themselves, setting boundaries, and getting their needs met. They prioritize themselves and say no to other things without feeling guilty. Every wife hears her husband step up to self-care with statements such as, "I can't right now, I'm only focused on this . . . I don't feel well. I need to take it easy . . . I really need time with my friends." But women, because of our nurturing instincts and societal norms, put everyone else first more often than not. We feel guilty when we don't because we're wired for stress in ways men aren't. For example, men can ignore a crying baby, but [our brains light up](#) when we just think we hear a whimper. Women have stress receptors in the brain that men don't. Ultimately, stress drives us to do everything for everyone—except ourselves.

Like it or not, women and men's gender profiles and skill sets are different. But if we understand our brains and our biology—such as the fact that more things stress women out—we can learn to work *with* rather than against ourselves. In any sport, when you know your weaknesses on the field of play, you know how to prepare so you can best support your team. If we know certain things tax us, let's prepare so we can use them to our advantage. Our uniquely female abilities can serve us well as we move through our daily routines at the speed of business. But the downside of stressors (like multitasking) is a special kind of hell: hormonal imbalance.

Lean In . . . to Your Hormones

You picked up this book because you want a great family and a great career. You want it all, and you can have it! By prioritizing your delicate hormonal balance—and creating room for the self-care we've all given lip service to—you'll become your happiest, healthiest, most promotable self. Hormones are not another excuse to keep anyone down. If we lean into our hormones, they become our greatest ally. We can bring to the boardroom table what we as women do best—tap in emotionally and put ourselves in other people's shoes. Yes, we're nurturers. Yes, we're caregivers. But if we want to make it in the corporate world, we also have to be completely unapologetic about taking care of ourselves first. Say no to that guilt! Because the better we care for ourselves, the better example we set for everyone around us, including our children. Ask yourself—how do you want your children to treat themselves? Do we want our kids to take care

of themselves, or do we want them to sacrifice their health and sanity for others? Lead by example.

A lot of women I work with one-on-one come to me because they're falling apart. The fact is, most of them are simply dealing with hormonal imbalances. Without the self-care of balanced nutrition and physical exercise, they stay stuck. These women have made it to the top of their game, but their superiors—all men—ask them to be more “empathetic” with their employees.

“You need to tone it down,” male coworkers tell them, even those beneath them in the organizational hierarchy. These women reached the top only because they were willing to compartmentalize and focus. But now that they're where they wanted to be, they're perceived as, well, kind of a bitch. We shouldn't have to become more like men to earn the same respect in business.

I firmly believe self-care is the secret to increasing women's representation in the highest levels of corporations. But self-care is more than just sticking with diets, distracting yourself from cravings, or making a long list of “things I can't have.” In fact, self-care has nothing to do with deprivation! Self-care is about showing up in the world the way you want to. Self-care is directly related to killer performance, not just at work but in every area of your life.

When you take the time to eat and exercise based on how you want to feel versus placing restrictions on yourself, you tap into your body's intuitive wisdom. You make choices based on what will best fuel your day, whether it's filled with client meetings or your kids' bubble baths. If you know how to eat for hormonal balance, you'll have great energy, get rid of those pesky cravings (I shit you not!), and keep your mood stable so you're not riding the emotional roller coaster all day. You'll have more confidence, you'll be more patient, you'll perform better, and you'll set a good example for those you love.

Regardless of what brought you to this book in the first place—be it stress issues or depression or lack of work-life balance—you're going to come away with unapologetic, straightforward methods to balance your hormones. You'll impact your mental health, emotional health, and physical health and reintroduce yourself to feeling healthy and rejuvenated—not perpetually exhausted and resentful.

I can help you let go of the guilt. You don't have to sacrifice everything, be it time with your kids or your career advancements. You can continue at the level you want without burning

out. I'm giving you permission to be unapologetic about taking care of your needs. Be the leader you want to be by setting the example of taking care of yourself.

To get there from here, we'll cover everything you need to know about self-care. You'll learn the nonnegotiable things you can do every day to step up and be your best, like sleep, stress relief, mindfulness, and nutrition. You'll learn them in a way that makes sense for movers and shakers like you—through no-nonsense, action-oriented steps. You're pretty much going to bulletproof yourself with hacks around challenges unique to women. At the end of the day, if you can understand how to support yourself during stressful times, you won't throw yourself under the bus.

Let's harness control of your hormones, your health, and your life to bump up your productivity, have energy to spare, save your fertility, and lower your stress. Prioritizing yourself isn't a nice to have. It's the only way. We are wired for success; it just looks different in us than in men. That means not trying to compete with men doing things their way. Learn to do it your way. Let's create a generation of women who know how to step into the best version of themselves!

After all, multimillionaire investor and star of *Shark Tank* and *Dragons' Den* [Kevin O'Leary](#) actually prefers to invest in women-owned and managed businesses.

[N]ot some of my returns, all of my returns, have come from the [businesses] run by women or owned by women . . . I don't have a single company run by a man right now that's outperformed the ones run by women . . . [T]he outcomes have been very, very good on these women-run businesses because they know what they're doing with time, and goal-setting, and these things matter in micro-communities where culture is a big deal.

There are a lot of benefits to running businesses successfully and treating people well. But if you sacrifice yourself—your health, your brain power, or your sleep—you're taking away from your career and your family. If we as women want to get to the highest levels, we just can't do that. We need to make taking care of ourselves as easy as possible so it's not just another project.

Nobody is as important as you. I know that may seem like a selfish statement. But if you don't prioritize yourself, you're not loving yourself enough. A lack of self-love is going to sabotage your best efforts. Give up the idea that you have to sacrifice yourself to be a great

person, boss, spouse, or parent. I promise, when you're healthy and happy, you'll be at your best across the board.

Now, maybe you're skeptical. Good! But before you hop on Google to find out if this book about women's hormones and the gender representation gap was secretly written by a misogynist, think about what it would feel like to transform the way you approach your health, your hustle, and your state of mind. Then I hope you'll join me on the next page.

Quick Action Steps

- Remember that you don't have to act like a man to climb the career ladder. Evolution has given women a unique hormonal profile. Let's work WITH nature to self-care and de-stress, not against her.
- Let go of the guilt. It's your job to put your needs first, not last. Put the oxygen mask on yourself first so you can take care of others. No other arrangement works.