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# Be Still My Racing Heart: An Analysis of Worry Content and Stress Responses in Hook-ups

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## Abstract

The original conceptualization of a stress response revolves around the concept of “fight or flight”, but theoretical work led by Taylor illuminated an overlooked response to danger called “tend and befriend” (Taylor 2000). Taylor’s theory posits that some people, especially women, exhibit behaviors in response to stress related to the protection of offspring (“tending”) and/or related to seeking out social support and affiliation for the purpose of mutual protection and comfort (“befriending”). Through the lens of Tend and Befriend, differences in the nature of responses to stressful hook-up situations were analyzed to evaluate their relationship with the content of one’s worries related to hook-ups. A large sample of young adults completed a survey on hookup behavior that included questions about their worries during hookups and questions about their reactions to their hookups. Results indicated that there is a range of reactions that include fight, flight, tend, befriend, and freeze.

## Introduction

In the 1920s, Cannon described the phenomenon “fight or flight”, which has historically been considered to be the primary response to stress. Fight is an aggressive, proactive reaction whereas flight is an avoidant reaction. One of the shortcomings of this theory is that it was primarily based on studies that included only male participants. This was the impetus that led Taylor to formulate the “tend and befriend” theory as an alternative stress response that may better describe women’s behavior. Tending is characterized by prioritizing the well-being of others over oneself in order to relieve stress, while befriend is characterized by utilizing social bonds to relieve stress. “Freeze” is another response to stress that is described as becoming physically immobile and/or dissociating from the situation.

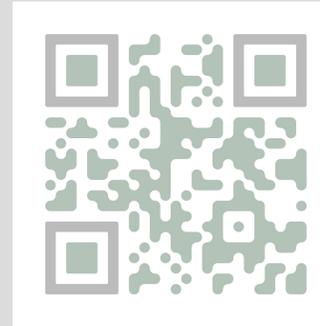
## Hypotheses

- Worries related to physical safety, being sexually assaulted, or being taken advantage of will correlate with tend and befriend responses. These worries will also be more common in female participants.
- Worries related to not having sex, not performing well, and not meeting expectations will be related to fight or flight responses. These worries will also be more common in male participants.

## Results

Results indicated that there are two factors for worry content for both sexes: general hook-up worries, and worries associated with dangerous and more realistic hook-up outcomes. The factor analysis for female stress responses revealed five factors: Fight, Flight, Depersonalization/Detachment, Tend, and Befriend. The factor analysis for male stress responses revealed four factors: Tend and Befriend/Freeze, Detachment/Dissociation, Fight, and Disengage/Befriend. Table 4 shows the correlations between female worry factors and female stress responses. Table 5 shows the correlations between male worry factors and male stress responses.

Scan the QR code or  
click [here](#) to view  
results



## Methods

### Participants:

- 1,768 young adults were surveyed from a national sample collected via Qualtrics.
- 50.11% of participants identified as male
- 49.89% of participants identified as female
- 54.57% of participants identified as Caucasian/white; 18.53% identified as African American/Black; 8.50% identified as Mixed Race; 7.74% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander; 4.70% identified as “other”; 4.31% identified as Native American/First People; and 1.65% identified as Middle Eastern
- The mean age of participants was 19.93 years old

### Procedure:

- After giving consent, participants completed an online survey using the program Qualtrics, followed by a debriefing page.
- Participants answered a series of questions where they scaled 1 (*Never*)– 9 (*Always*) on questions regarding worries about hook-ups and reactions to stressful hook up situations.

### Analysis:

- We conducted three principle axis factor analyses and looked at which factors loaded together for worry content and for stress responses to those worries. Separate analyses were done on stress response factors for each sex.

## Discussion

The results did not support the hypotheses that worries related to sexual assault and safety would correlate with tend and befriend stress responses and that worries related to sexual expectations, performance, and rejection would correlate with fight or flight stress responses. The secondary hypothesis that certain worries would be more frequently expressed by men or by women was also not supported. While the nature of worry did not differ by gender, stress responses did. Men and women responded differently to the same worries. All of the proposed stress responses (i.e. fight or flight, tend and befriend, and freeze) were seen in both men and women with differing frequencies and combinations. Women had markedly clearer, unambiguous responses to worry than men. This may indicate a conflict of gender roles and societal expectations for men, or it may be that women receive stronger messages about what they should do in the case of a hook-up situation gone awry.

The data analysis produced several significant correlations, listed in the results section. These correlations may provide insight into the connection between context and stress responses for men and women. While both genders exhibited all types of stress responses, men were more likely to respond to hook-up worries by detaching or disengaging in both serious and non-serious situations. They were less likely to tend and befriend in situations involving serious and dangerous hook-up worries. Women were more likely to tend, freeze, or fight in hook-up situations with less perceived risk, and were more likely to detach or experience depersonalization (related to the freeze response) in hook-up situations associated with dangerous outcomes. The correlation between women’s hook-up worries and fight or flight responses was weakest for worries related to dangerous, realistic hook-up situations.

These results support a critical need in psychological research: it is imperative that we expand our understanding of stress beyond fight or flight. It is clear that there are a wide variety of responses to stressful situations during hookups that need to be explored. With the addition of tend, befriend, and freeze responses, we can achieve a better understanding of how both men and women respond behaviorally to hook-up stress. In order to properly address issues such as consent and sexual assault prevention, it is necessary to get a complete picture of how men and women experience and react to stressful sexual situations.