What a Man Wants

By Robert Sachs

 In a recent article on stress in the online journal of the American Psychological Association, the differences between men and women in their perception, expression, and how they cope with stress was the focus. Not surprising, it was evident in almost distinction drawn that men report stress in terms of feeling or being stressed far less women. Furthermore, what men do to relieve the stress they don’t report is not defined in terms of the stress reducing benefits of whatever they do.

 Of course, it would not be difficult to use the common cultural vernacular and stereotypes to explain this behavior. But, this does not necessarily offer solutions and possible ways for spas to reach out to a demographic that needs as much stress reduction as women who make up the greater percentage of the spa-going population.

 Thus, for this article I first want to begin with an approach about the distinction between the body and emotions between men and women as defined in oriental medicine, spiritual psychology and philosophy.

 Possibly the most basic concept that we in the west are familiar with when it comes to Male and Female in oriental vernacular is YIN and YANG. These are the Chinese terms. At their most theoretical, they refer to refer to expanding and contracting forces of nature; forces that cannot exist by themselves, but are always complimentary. Oriental medical theory teaches that both of these forces are within each of us, making our organs and body. Although the theory can get quite complex and happens at many levels, in a nutshell, if there is a predominance of or stronger display of a YANG influence, we present to the world a male body. If there is more YIN influence, we see a female body. In Ayurvedic terms, YIN is associated with KAPHA, thus dominated by the elements of earth and water from the Five Element theory common to all these systems. More closely connected to the female principle, this explains why we refer to “Mother Earth.” YANG in Ayurveda is PITTA, a combination of fire and water, the elements associated with and function in our body as catalytic or action and transformation oriented. This is more in keeping with masculine energy. Seen in this way, is it any wonder why women more easily ask and respond to the question, “How are you feeling?” whereas men more easily ask and respond to the question, “What do you need?” or “What can I do for you?” Thus, women are more natural at being. Men are more natural at doing. At the same time, each of us wants to feel complete and balanced. Thus, regardless of whether we say it or not or know how to effectively reach out, deep down we have a sense of what we need. Woman seek action. Men seek wisdom.

 Translate this into the world and words of spas. Woman will do more adventurous and new therapies. They will do and be the leaders in bringing their partner into a class. They will seek the changes. On the other hand, men who are the doers will be more likely to seek out treatments that are pampering, where they can be inert and be done unto. They can especially let go if they feel that their therapist is wise/knowledgeable, regardless of whether or they are a male or female therapist. Of course if the therapist is female, there may be a sexual tension or dynamic that arises. But, if this is reasonably and professionally managed, what men receive from a female therapist is a gentle touch that evokes in them a deeper sense of wisdom and connection with that intuitive side men so often pooh-pooh if amongst their male cohort. By the same token, from an Ayurvedic point of view, if the source or identified stress is referred to on a more physiological level by the client – a bad back or shoulder – you may find that a male therapist is best to pair with the client.

 Although the APA article expressed that women are more likely to report their stress than men and that they are less resistant to change, the simple fact is that neither our current dominant health care model our modern, hustle bustle culture, suggest or encourage us to properly look at how our lifestyle – how we eat, exercise, and rest can hinder or help us with our stress. Whereas women may learn to make healthier choices by attending a class or coming together with a group of friends, this is usually not the way for men. Despite men’s groups and fraternal organizations, more than likely, in the context of a spa, it will be a well-respected expert talking one to one and giving personal, individualized encouragement that will be more impactful.

 Although it may sound like a cliché, men ARE concerned about performance.

In the teaching of Tibetan Buddhism, the male energy and principle is associated with skillful means or action. Female energy is associated with wisdom. We act effectively in our world when we have both. Wisdom without action is ineffective, perhaps whimsical. If skillful means has no wisdom, it can be fascistic or endlessly immature. Thus we see the typical archetypes of the authoritarian husband or mate or the man that does not want to be bothered with ambiguity and the messiness of life, always wanting to play with his toys. Men may act these ways unwittingly, but we now live in a culture and time when most men know better. They may not know what to do to change what they are doing, but in the end, men want to perform effectively in all the roles that life throws at them. They want to be good partners on all levels. They want to excel in the work and play they engage in. They want to be protectors to their families and communities.

 Marketing spa services to men is not about reducing their stress. It should be about improving their performance. Pamper them, give them space, and have the people who want to teach them about lifestyle changes be examples of what those changes should look like. Explain to them how everything you are doing or what you are teaching them will improve their worklife, their home life, their overall vitality. Don’t get too personal, but make a personal connection.

 Today, the media touts the age and virtues of the “metrosexual.” Where so many of the roles that were once considered male or female are now shared, a man’s identity and masculine prowess are given far less attention. As much as the feminist movements have done much to move the bar in helping women be seen and respected as equals, qualities of maleness beyond the stereotypes and dysfunction of our time need to be addressed. And the honoring and caring for maleness in the spa is a service that will not only serve men, but the families and communities they wish to perform in.