

# Tend-and-Befriend Response

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## Tend-and-Befriend Response

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Evolutionary Psychology, Behavioral Endocrinology

**Proponents:** Shelley E. Taylor, Laura Cousino Klein, and colleagues

### 1. Core Principles

The Tend-and-Befriend response is a hypothesized stress reaction pattern that serves as an alternative to the historically dominant "fight-or-flight" mechanism, proposing a fundamentally different approach to managing acute danger, especially among females. This model posits that when faced with a threat, individuals--primarily women--are predisposed to engage in two specific, protective behaviors: **tending**, which involves the protection and nurturing of offspring and vulnerable individuals, and **befriending**, which is the seeking out and maintenance of social contacts and support networks. The ultimate goal of this complex behavioral sequence is not aggression or immediate escape, but the minimization of risk to the self and dependent young through the strategic use of social capital and defensive nurturing. This response is rooted deeply in evolutionary pressures, where solitary confrontation or rapid flight often proves detrimental to species requiring prolonged maternal care, making coalition-building a superior long-term survival strategy.

Unlike the fight-or-flight response, which is characterized by high sympathetic nervous system arousal leading to heightened aggression or rapid withdrawal, the Tend-and-Befriend response is associated with a neurobiological profile that promotes calmness and social affiliation. This mechanism suggests that stress does not automatically trigger competitive or antagonistic behaviors across all populations; instead, it can elicit powerful prosocial behaviors intended to pool resources, increase collective vigilance, and reduce overall group suffering. The concept fundamentally shifted the psychological understanding of stress coping, which, for decades, had relied almost exclusively on male-centric physiological models that emphasized individualistic reactions to danger. The Tend-and-Befriend framework thus provides a necessary lens through which researchers can examine altruism, social bonding, and gender differences in stress management strategies.

The core principle hinges on the idea that human females, due to the disproportionate investment in parenting and the necessity of protecting altricial (helpless) offspring, developed a specialized biological pathway for coping with threat. This pathway prioritizes the safety of the collective and the protection of vulnerable kin over individual combat or escape. By initiating **tending** behaviors--such as quieting the group, seeking safe haven, or actively protecting those who are hurt--the individual reduces the visibility and vulnerability of the unit. Simultaneously, **befriending** allows for the rapid mobilization of social resources, securing allies who can provide defense, aid, and emotional support, thereby transforming a solitary survival challenge into a collective effort to

mitigate danger and restore equilibrium.

## 2. Historical Development and Context

The development of the Tend-and-Befriend hypothesis arose from a critique of the foundational stress model, the **fight-or-flight response**, articulated largely by Walter Cannon in the 1920s. Cannon's model, while revolutionary for its time, was established primarily through research on male subjects (both human and animal) and emphasized highly aggressive or avoidant reactions mediated by catecholamines (adrenaline and noradrenaline). This traditional model was subsequently reinforced by later stress researchers like Hans Selye. However, by the late 20th century, researchers began noting that women often displayed behavioral patterns under stress that did not fit neatly into the aggressive or escapist categories. Female subjects, when stressed, frequently reported seeking out social interaction, sharing anxieties, or engaging in efforts to protect others, rather than engaging in physical confrontation or isolating themselves.

Recognizing this systematic discrepancy, psychologist Shelley E. Taylor and her colleagues formally introduced the Tend-and-Befriend model in a seminal 2000 paper published in the *Psychological Review*. Taylor argued that the prevailing models were incomplete because they failed to account for the unique survival pressures faced by females throughout human and mammalian evolution, specifically the need to protect offspring who could not be quickly carried or defended during high-intensity conflict. Taylor proposed that the psychological and neurobiological processes activated during stress differ significantly by gender, leading to distinct coping strategies. This hypothesis was influential because it provided a robust, evolutionary-based explanation for documented differences in male and female stress responses and social behaviors.

The introduction of the Tend-and-Befriend concept marked a significant moment in health psychology, demanding a reassessment of how stress physiology interacts with gender roles and social behavior. It moved beyond simply describing behavioral differences, instead offering a specific mechanism tied to hormonal regulation--particularly the role of oxytocin--to explain why these coping strategies evolved. This historical shift validated numerous observations previously categorized as mere anecdotal or cultural female coping strategies, elevating them to the status of a distinct and critical evolutionary survival mechanism equivalent in importance to fight-or-flight. The theory has since spurred extensive research into the interplay between social support, stress resilience, and the biological foundations of caregiving.

## 3. Behavioral Manifestations: Tending and Befriending

The Tend-and-Befriend response is defined by two interlocking sets of behaviors, both aimed at increasing the probability of survival for the individual and their social unit. **Tending** refers to the quiet, nurturing behaviors designed to protect the self and offspring from harm, often by minimizing

cues that might attract predators or aggressors. This includes actively soothing children, minimizing noise and movement, seeking concealed shelters, and prioritizing the immediate needs of dependent or injured group members. Tending is inherently defensive and altruistic; it involves diverting personal resources and attention to those most vulnerable, which, from an evolutionary perspective, protects the genetic lineage. This behavioral pattern is critical when an aggressive response would expose the vulnerable to greater risk.

Conversely, **befriending** involves active engagement with the social environment, characterized by the creation and maintenance of social networks during times of stress. This involves reaching out to friends, family, or community members to share information about the threat, seek mutual assistance, and form alliances. The source material highlights the female tendency to "use friendship and peaceful techniques to solve problems rather than force," which is the essence of befriending. This diplomatic and affiliative approach is highly effective in increasing collective defense, ensuring the dispersal of warning signals, and facilitating humanitarian-oriented social groups intended to reduce human suffering. The formation of these robust social bonds acts as a buffer against future stressors and secures reciprocal support.

In modern contexts, these behaviors manifest in diverse ways. **Tending** can be observed when individuals prioritize safety measures for their families during natural disasters or actively volunteer in caregiving roles following crises. **Befriending** is evident in phenomena such as 'stress sharing,' where individuals engage in extensive verbal processing of stressful events with their social circles, or the rapid formation of community support groups in response to local tragedy. These actions serve not only an emotional function but a practical one: increasing the likelihood of receiving aid, resources, and protection. The synergy between tending (internal protection) and befriending (external alliance building) creates a comprehensive stress management system distinct from the adrenaline-fueled aggression or avoidance of the fight-or-flight model.

#### 4. Physiological and Hormonal Basis

The physiological mechanisms underpinning the Tend-and-Befriend response provide strong support for its status as a distinct biological pathway. The key hormonal player in this response is oxytocin, often dubbed the 'bonding' or 'love' hormone, which is released in response to stress and social contact. Unlike the fight-or-flight model, which is dominated by the release of catecholamines (epinephrine and norepinephrine) and cortisol via the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, the Tend-and-Befriend response appears to be modulated by oxytocin's inhibitory effects on these stress hormones. Oxytocin promotes feelings of relaxation, dampens the fear response in the amygdala, and encourages affiliation, thus counteracting the typical mobilization of aggressive or avoidant behaviors driven by adrenaline.

In females, the effects of oxytocin are believed to be enhanced by the presence of estrogen, a sex

hormone that increases the number of oxytocin receptors in the brain. This estrogen-oxytocin interaction creates a robust biological substrate for stress-induced affiliative and nurturing behaviors. When a woman is stressed, the surge of oxytocin, facilitated by estrogen, directs her behavior toward social seeking and protective actions, reinforcing the desire to gather loved ones and create a safety net. This starkly contrasts with the male physiological response, where testosterone may mitigate the calming effects of oxytocin, leading to a greater likelihood of engaging in high-risk behaviors associated with fighting or immediate withdrawal. Therefore, the hormonal environment effectively steers the behavioral outcome of a stressful encounter toward either social integration or solitary action.

Furthermore, research suggests that the release of oxytocin during stress acts as a powerful regulator of the HPA axis, effectively short-circuiting the severe physical mobilization associated with chronic high cortisol levels. By encouraging social contact and physical bonding (e.g., hugging, nurturing), the Tend-and-Befriend response utilizes the calming feedback loops associated with oxytocin, leading to faster stress recovery and potentially better long-term health outcomes compared to individuals perpetually engaging in high-arousal stress coping. This neurobiological differentiation underscores the evolutionary efficiency of forming stable social groups as a primary defense mechanism, particularly for those carrying the primary burden of child-rearing.

## 5. Gender Differences and Evolutionary Rationale

The most salient feature of the Tend-and-Befriend theory is its primary association with the female stress response. The evolutionary rationale for this gender specialization is deeply tied to parental investment theory. For early human and mammalian females, the survival of dependent young was the paramount evolutionary pressure. If a mother were to engage in aggressive fighting or rapid, solitary flight, she would risk injury, death, or the abandonment of offspring incapable of fending for themselves. A noisy confrontation or hasty retreat would often be more dangerous than remaining quiet and seeking social protection. Therefore, natural selection favored females who responded to danger by increasing vigilance, securing offspring (tending), and mobilizing allies (befriending) who could collectively deter threats or provide communal safety.

Conversely, while males certainly exhibit social behavior, their stress response has historically been more strongly linked to resource competition, territorial defense, and mate guarding--behaviors that often require immediate, high-arousal physical responses. Because males typically had lower parental investment burdens in terms of prolonged physical dependency, the costs associated with fighting or fleeing were generally less detrimental to the immediate survival of the lineage, provided the male survived the encounter. This difference in reproductive strategy and survival risk led to the divergence in primary stress coping mechanisms, making fight-or-flight adaptive for the typically larger, more expendable male, and tend-and-befriend adaptive for the

resource-intensive, kin-protecting female.

It is important to note, however, that the Tend-and-Befriend response is not exclusive to women; it is a behavioral repertoire available to all humans, often activated in situations where social support is crucial, such as during major collective disasters. Nonetheless, the enhanced hormonal facilitation (oxytocin/estrogen) in females and the consistent cross-cultural observations linking women more strongly to affiliative coping strategies underscore the robustness of the gender differential proposed by Taylor's theory. Studies show that when men employ these behaviors, they tend to do so under specific, high-stress circumstances, whereas women often adopt affiliative strategies as their default mode of coping with both minor and major stressors.

## 6. Applications and Research Findings

The Tend-and-Befriend framework has extensive applications across various fields of psychological and medical research, particularly in understanding health outcomes and mental resilience. In health psychology, the theory helps explain why social support is such a potent moderator of stress-related illness, especially for women. Research consistently demonstrates that strong social networks, the result of successful befriending, are correlated with lower rates of cardiovascular disease, improved immune function, and better recovery trajectories following major medical events. The affiliative behaviors encouraged by the response translate directly into tangible health benefits by reducing the chronic activation of the HPA axis.

Furthermore, the theory is vital in counseling and clinical psychology. Understanding the Tend-and-Befriend impulse allows therapists to recognize and validate female coping mechanisms that might otherwise be dismissed as merely "emotional" or lacking in agency. For instance, interventions focusing on group therapy, community building, and shared narrative processing align perfectly with the innate befriending drive. The concept also sheds light on the sociological phenomenon described in the source material: the strong female tendency to join **humanitarian-oriented social groups** intended to reduce suffering. This behavior is a direct behavioral output of the stress response, channeling distress into collective, altruistic action rather than isolated confrontation.

In the field of organizational psychology, the response provides context for understanding teamwork and leadership under pressure. Leaders who prioritize affiliation, communication, and the protection of vulnerable team members (tending) often create high-trust environments, particularly in high-stakes situations. The findings support the idea that effective group survival often relies less on hyper-aggressive command structures and more on coordinated, supportive alliances formed through mutual reliance and diplomatic engagement. The application of this framework suggests that group resilience is often proportional to the strength of the social bonds forged during periods of perceived threat.

## 7. Criticisms and Limitations

While highly influential, the Tend-and-Befriend response is subject to several academic criticisms and limitations. One primary critique centers on the potential for **biological essentialism**, suggesting that the theory risks oversimplifying complex human behavior by rigidly assigning stress responses based on biological sex. Critics argue that while hormonal differences are undeniable, cultural and learned coping strategies play an equally powerful, if not greater, role in determining whether an individual fights, flees, tends, or befriends. A highly socialized male, for example, may consistently default to befriending, demonstrating that environment and learning can override presumed evolutionary biases.

Another limitation concerns the universality of the response across species and cultures. While Taylor initially focused on humans and higher primates, the exact expression and prevalence of the Tend-and-Befriend behaviors can vary significantly in different sociocultural contexts, particularly those with highly rigid gender roles or those facing unique ecological pressures. Furthermore, some researchers argue that the response is not fundamentally distinct from fight-or-flight but rather a behavioral variation mediated by different endocrine levels; that is, the underlying neurological stress mechanism (HPA axis activation) is identical, but the hormonal environment simply biases the behavioral output toward affiliation rather than aggression.

Finally, critics point out that while befriending can be adaptive, it can also lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as **co-rumination**--the excessive, repetitive discussion of problems with others, which can increase anxiety and depression rather than alleviating stress. While the initial impulse to affiliate is protective, the quality of the social interaction matters significantly. Therefore, the theory must be viewed not as a universally positive outcome, but as a framework that describes a tendency, the ultimate effectiveness of which depends on the context and the quality of the resulting social support network.

### Further Reading

[Shelley E. Taylor - Wikipedia](#)

[Tend and befriend - Wikipedia](#)

[Oxytocin - Wikipedia](#)

Taylor, S. E., Klein, L. C., Lewis, B. P., Gruenewald, T. L., Gurung, R. A. R., & Updegraff, J. A. (2000). Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: Tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological Review*, 107(3), 411-429.