DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 040 RC 021 161

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TITLE The Eustress Paradigm: A Strategy for Decreasing Stress in Wilderness Adventure Programming.
PUB DATE 1996-00-00
NOTE 14p.; In: Women's Voices in Experiential Education; see RC 021 160.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; Coping; Emotional Development; Experiential Learning; *Females; Feminist Criticism; Models; Risk; *Stress Variables; *Well Being; Wilderness
IDENTIFIERS *Risk Taking; *Stress (Biological)

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes that stress has been misused in traditional adventure education and presents a new model of risk taking based on the literature on stress and feminist perspectives in adventure education. Proponents of the traditional adventure perspective state that the intentional use of stress is central to the change process in wilderness therapy, and that raising stress by exaggerating the level of risk sets the stage for a potentially transformative experience. On the other hand, practitioners working from a feminist perspective seek to minimize stress, engage in dialogue about risk, and promote personal power and choice in order to create the necessary conditions to encourage "authentic risk taking" and facilitate "eustress" (psychologically beneficial stress). Eustress is not dependent on task completion but rather, is manifested through an individual's subjective experience. The nine conditions promoting eustress include self-awareness, self-determination, and taking pleasure in the success of coping activities. The negative outcomes of stress far outweigh its benefits and may be long-term. The seven elements of a model for promoting eustress in adventure education are presented through a narrative about a woman participating in a 3-day canoe outing. These elements are: seeing each individual as the beginning point, preparing for risk taking, entering into a novel setting, allowing choice, supporting authentic risk taking, evaluating experience, and seeing the individual as the ending point. Contains 33 references. (SV)

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# The Eustress Paradigm: A Strategy for Decreasing Stress in Wilderness Adventure Programming

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## Introduction

Ethical questions abound in the discussions of the role of stress in adventure programming. If stress, "a condition which arouses anxiety or fear" (Ewert, 1989b, p. 70), is a consistent element of wilderness adventures, to what extent should it be further manipulated or lessened? If risk taking is urged upon a client from a position of stress, is there a tendency to jeopardize or enhance physical and emotional safety? I investigated these questions by analyzing both the traditional and feminist perspectives on adventure education. In light of my inquiry, I propose that the use of "stress" has been mishandled in traditional adventure education. Furthermore, I believe the concept of "eustress" is vaguely and incorrectly interpreted and applied in traditional adventure education. The original writings on eustress are more congruent with a feminist perspective. I present a new model for risk taking that is based on the literature on stress and feminist perspectives in adventure education. The Eustress Paradigm is a strategy for decreasing unnecessary stress and increasing psychological and physiological benefits which result from eustress. Because I first began to conceptualize this model when I was exploring key differences and similarities between traditional and feminist perspectives on wilderness adventure programming, the first section of this chapter will review both perspectives.

## The Traditional Perspective

I define the traditional perspective of adventure education as the philosophical movement which arose from the Outward Bound model created by Kurt Hahn. Originally, Outward Bound was a survival school created to meet the needs of young British seamen (Miner, 1990). The traditional perspective has its roots in a model which was created in a different country for specific cultural and gender

needs. Evidence of this historical influence is found in Miner's statement on applying Outward Bound in the United States:

> The first major break with our constituency precedent was the introduction and astonishing success of courses for young women, along with the equally "astonishing" discovery that girls could handle—at times even with a superior blitheness—the same courses of the same degree of difficulty, that had been designed for boys. (p. 63)

Clearly, there is sex discrimination in the history of Outward Bound. Fortunately, since the 1960s, the field of adventure experiential education has been evolving philosophically. One example is the recent trend toward considering issues of emotional safety as well as physical safety (Priest, 1991). However, it is important to acknowledge the feminist roots of this methodology to include emotional safety as a priority (Mitten, 1994; Warren & Rheingold, 1993). This example, which some may call appropriation, serves as an illustration that the traditional perspective needs to acknowledge its historical roots.

## Traditional Perspective on Stress

Proponents of the traditional perspective state that "the intentional use of stress is central to the change process of wilderness therapy. Stress is often magnified by the students' tendencies to exaggerate the level of risk. . . . The resulting anxiety sets the stage for a potentially transformational experience" (Kimball & Bacon, 1993, p. 21). I propose that physical and emotional safety are jeopardized when transformation is dependent on a participant experiencing stress. However, the traditional perspective is contrary to this premise.

Traditional-perspective followers argue that most adventure programs set physical safety as a priority. Within these programs there is a significant gap between perceived risk and the actual risk of an activity (Kimball & Bacon, 1993; Nadler, 1993). Those working from this perspective advocate enhancing the perception of risk when appropriate. For example, Nadler (1993) suggests "increasing the constructive level of anxiety. . . increasing the sense of the unknown and unpredictable by doing what is unexpected . . . developing behavior contracts of emotional and behavioral risks . . . withholding or increasing the amount of information given about activities . . ." (p. 68). Justification for this approach is offered by Ewert (1989a) who proposes that "just enough" fear needs to be present in adventure activities. Evidently, this fear can be increased by manipulating information since it is the information which provides an individual with a sense of control. Ewert, therefore, concludes that the "greater the perceived risk in the situation, the greater the individual's felt need for information" (p. 21).

Priest and Baillie (1987) suggest increasing the perception of risk when working with timid or fearful clients:

> The role of the facilitators is to build confidence by increasing the perceived risk of an activity until these participants are expecting a condition of misadventure to ensue. Then, after successfully coaxing the participants through to a condition of adventure, the facilitators further aid them by reflecting back on the experience and drawing out the key points of learning. (p. 20)

They are suggesting that the actual risk of an activity be manipulated, known as "structuring for failure," in order to deflate the ego of a fearless or arrogant participant (Priest, 1993; Priest & Baillie, 1987). Clearly, advocates of the traditional adventure education perspective propose utilizing inherent stressors for the growth of the participant. This technique of manipulating stress and anxiety is a crucial point of difference between the traditional and feminist perspectives.

## The Feminist Perspective

I believe the feminist perspective is found within the writings on adventure education which question the socio-political structure of the field of experiential education. For example, supporters of this perspective are willing to analyze current or past gender discrimination within the field. They critique the usefulness of experiential methods with populations which do not represent the mainstream dominant culture (e.g., women, girls, people of color, etc.). Finally, those with this perspective advocate for creating new paradigms and dialogue which address these discrepancies.

## The Feminist Perspective on Stress

It is the feminist commitment to analysis that led to questioning the use of stress in the traditional perspective. Instead of condoning the manipulation of stress, those working from a feminist perspective attempt to lessen the experienced stress of participants. Woodswomen, a women's outdoor adventure company founded in 1977, can be used as an example. The instructors at Woodswomen do not purposefully create stressful situations. As Woodswomen director Denise Mitten (1985) points out, "The less stress the participants are feeling, the better able they are to cope with new activities, participate as a constructive group member and handle challenging physical situations" (p. 22). The guides do not "pull surprises, even in the name of building character or creating a learning situation" (p. 21). Encouraging risk taking and minimizing stress is encouraged at Woodswomen through "discussing the risk and working to remove the mystery about the activity or encounter. Discussing fears. Clarifying with participants why the risk may be worth it to them (or why it might not be). Helping participants set their own goals" (Mitten, 1986, p. 33). This emphasis on minimizing stress, creating dialogue about risk, and encouraging personal choice sets the stage for what I term "authentic risk taking."

The possibility for authentic risk taking is developed within an environment which encourages appropriate risk taking. Rachel Holzwarth (1994), the founder of Alaska Women in the Wilderness, believes in appropriate risk taking which de-emphasizes competition and encourages risk, not stress. Similar to Holzwarth's distinction between risk and stress is Mitten's (1986) belief that women learn from risk taking. This is supported by Parrino's (1979) parallel of risk taking to the principle of adaptive exposure. Parrino claims risk taking is habit changing and anxiety reducing.

In order for risk taking to be effective, Mitten (personal communication, April 5, 1994) underscores the necessity of "making sure a person is getting a choice" in all activities. According to Mitten, a person's internalized esteem is what allows them to own their risk taking and their challenges. In other words, a person already brings esteem to an activity and what they need is affirmation. This outlook differs from the traditional perspective which claims that risk, challenge, and success build esteem.

These sentiments are echoed in Tippett's (1993) distinction between stress and challenge. Tippett draws from the work of Lazarus and Launier (1978) and contends that stress is similar to a sense of jeopardy. Thus, stress decreases self-esteem, whereas challenges increase self-esteem. Despite a perceived risk with challenges, the individual or group expects success. Tippett elaborates by stating:

> The subjective experience of an activity determines whether it is defined as a stress or challenge. Almost any activity will be experienced as a stress if it is imposed on participants. Yet the same activity can improve self-esteem if participants choose it themselves. For example, being forced to continue on a difficult rock climb is likely to undermine self-esteem even if the climb is completed. However, if participants know they can choose which climb to attempt and can come off a climb if necessary without loss of face, they will experience climbing as a challenge. Self-esteem will increase and the holding environment will be supported. (1993, pp. 91-92)

This comparative analysis reveals key differences in how stress and subsequent risk is viewed in both perspectives. In the traditional model, stress is viewed not only as central and desirable, but there is approval for manipulating stress levels and/or intentionally creating stress as a companion to risk taking. In the feminist perspective, there is no advocacy for intentionally manipulating stress levels, nor is stress viewed as central to a client having a transformative experience. Rather, the feminist perspective relies on the subjective experience of a client and the importance of personal choice as preparation for risk-taking behavior. Risk taking is supported through acknowledgment of a person's esteem, strengths, personal awareness, and power of choice. I believe that this approach to risk taking contains sound judgment and is supported by the research on stress and eustress.

## Stress Research

Originally, Dr. Hans Selye (1974) borrowed the word "stress" from physics to describe the body's response to environmental and emotional stressors. A stressor may be pleasant or unpleasant (Selye, 1974). The degree of intensity and duration of a stressor will vary. Stressors affect the entire human system: our thoughts, our physiology, and our behaviors all work together to produce an effective response strategy (Parrino, 1979). It is important to note that the definition of stress has evolved to include both the stressor and the body's stress response. Commonly, the interpretation of the word stress is negative and defined as synonymous to distress (Davies, 1980).

Stress causes our bodies to experience a "flight or fight" response to a threat. Conditions which produce the "greatest perceived threat in a given situation are the following: lack of predictability, lack of control, lack of outlets for frustration. When these elements are present, innocuous situations can turn stressful, sometimes far out of proportion to their actual stimulus" (Chopra, 1993, p. 156). Our bodies undergo physiological changes in order to gather enough energy to respond to the threat. In order to cope, our bodies switch from normal anabolic metabolism, which builds tissues, to catabolic metabolism, which breaks down tissues (Chopra, 1993). If we experience catabolic metabolism for prolonged periods, it is harmful to our bodies and may lead to disease and/or death (Chopra, 1993; Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 1982).

Clearly, the physiological effects of stress are harmful, yet life presents us with stressful events on a daily basis. The phases of our response to these stressors are: "1) the stressful event; 2) your inner appraisal of it; 3) your body's reaction" (Chopra, 1993, p. 154). One point of agreement in the writings on stress is the importance of an individual's perceptions and interpretation of a stressor (Cherry, 1978; Chopra, 1993; Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 1982; Edwards & Cooper, 1988; Parrino, 1979; Selye, 1974, 1983). Why is a person's subjective experience so critical in regard to stress? The point of interpretation is where an individual has the potential to control or transform their body's stress response (Chopra, 1993). It is this juncture of interpretation that allows an individual to experience eustress rather than stress.

## Eustress: Good Stress

Eustress, named by Selye (Cherry, 1978) for the Greek prefix *eus* meaning good, is a term that appears in experiential education literature as an important dynamic of risk taking (Mason, 1987; Priest, 1993; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). This is exemplified in Priest's (1993) theoretical model of competence for human risk-taking behavior. Priest's model juxtaposes distress and eustress as the two possibilities a person experiences as they test perceived self-efficacy against actual competence. In this model, a person's entry into eustress is based on successful task accomplishment, while the entry into distress is based on task failure. I contend this is a

misinterpretation of the concept of eustress. A review of literature on stress research reveals that certain internal conditions must be present in order for eustress to occur. In fact, there is no dependence on task completion. Rather, the focus is on process and how one perceives and internalizes situations. In my opinion, based on various readings, the following nine conditions are necessary for eustress to occur:

1. Self-awareness of perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (Cherry, 1978; Parrino, 1979).
2. Valuing the subjective experience of the individual. A person's attitude defines experience as pleasant or unpleasant. Therefore, a person has the power to convert distress into eustress (Cherry, 1978).
3. Self-determination in setting attainable goals (Cherry, 1978).
4. Self-awareness of one's optimal personal stress level (Cherry, 1978).
5. An ability to meet the demands placed on an individual (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).
6. The person must desire and consider it important to meet the demand placed upon them (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).
7. The individual must appraise the current situation as meeting or exceeding their desired state (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).
8. The individual views the coping activities as enjoyable, regardless of the impact on stress (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).
9. The individual derives pleasure from the success of the coping activities (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).

These nine conditions will be further interpreted with a narrative example in the Eustress Paradigm section.

Eustress is a powerful way to experience life. Evidently, eustress puts far less demand on the body than other types of stress (Cherry, 1978). Edwards and Cooper (1988) speculate that "eustress may directly influence health, and perhaps improve it by stimulating the production of anabolic hormones, HDL cholesterol, and other health-enhancing biochemical substances" (p. 1448). Clearly, eustress has the inherent potential to directly and positively benefit physical health.

Positive benefits exist indirectly for psychological health as well. Edwards and Cooper (1988) suggest that eustress helps to facilitate coping abilities and efforts. In fact, eustress may ease social interaction, thereby increasing social support and enhancing a person's coping abilities. Another way that eustress enhances coping abilities is by facilitating feelings of mastery and control. Eustress may promote a sense of "self-efficacy and optimism, particularly when the source of eustress is relevant to the coping task at hand" (p. 1449). In other words, a new rock climber who has experienced eustress in other climbing situations may transfer feelings of self-efficacy and optimism to a current situation on the rocks.

In summary, eustress is not dependent on task completion. Rather, eustress is manifested through an individual's subjective experience. Eustress is not a factor

which can be manipulated by a course instructor. If a participant experiences eustress, the potential exists to positively affect self-efficacy and competency, as well as transfer to other situations where coping is necessary.

## Stress and Eustress in Wilderness Adventures

What is the relationship of stress, which is omnipresent in everyday life, to wilderness adventures? First, it is logical to conclude that adventure programs contain inherent stressors, just as everyday life has stressors. Therefore, every participant will experience these stressors. A study by Dickinson (1992) found that the "levels of anxiety (stress) and arousal during adventure activities are constantly changing as different situations arise" (p. 36). The literature also shows there can be too much stress in adventure programs (Ewert, 1989a; Hendee & Brown, 1987). This leads us to the pivotal question, asked by Ewert (1989a, p. 19): "Can instructors be sure, however, that the level of stress and anxiety that their students experience is both appropriate and beneficial?" I believe that the negative outcomes of stress far outweigh any possibility of benefit.

What are the potential negative implications of stress in a wilderness program? First, it is questionable whether true community forms under crisis conditions. Mitten (1986) states:

> If people bond under stress it is often bonding together against something or someone. This can lead to scapegoating or groups fractioning. For some people bonding under stress can feel familiar and even comfortable. This is especially true for people from families where bonding often took place during or after conflict. These people may leave a course believing that they have made a meaningful, honest connection with another person(s). However, this bonding does not lead to community building nor does it in the long run increase self-esteem. (p. 32)

Scott Peck (1987), the author of *A Different Drum*, a book on community and peace making, concurs with Mitten: "Once the crisis is over, so—virtually always—is the community. The collective spirit goes out of the people as they return to their ordinary lives, and community is lost" (p. 77).

Beyond the loss of authentic community is the possibility of psychological harm and/or emotional distress being experienced by individuals. Mitten (1986), asked workshop participants to describe what situations are stressful:

> Too much to do and not enough time, lack of sleep, too heavy loads, physical illness or injury, external standards to meet, getting up early, lack of food, being wet and cold . . . someone not being honest, nonchoiceful risky situations, clashes of ideas and value systems, miscommunication, pressure from a boss, and when someone puts pressure on you to make a decision. (p. 30)

Mitten also asked the workshop participants how they feel in stressful situations:

> Alone, tense, like a child, irritable, defensive, frustrated, depressed, hyper, immobilized, like they want to cry, scream, and that they often want others to feel bad too. Women also notice changes in their behavior. Some may get more aggressive, or others more quiet or passive. Some women withdraw, or feel numb physically and emotionally. Others get hostile, blame and are impatient with the group. Some neglect personal care, sleep a lot or feel tired all the time, are apologetic, or abuse substances. Some women become accident prone, walk into things, and can't focus. (p. 30)

While this poll of participants was specific to women, it offers indications that stressful experiences do not facilitate learning. More research needs to be done on how stress is experienced by a wide variety of populations on adventure outings.

Another downfall of experiencing stress is the lack of long-term benefit. Tippett (1993) states:

> While stress may be helpful for learning to push past self-imposed limits, it is counter-indicated for in-depth reparative work. Psychic growth requires a holding environment where anxiety is reduced. Since anxiety has been responsible for solidifying maladaptive behaviors, increasing it will only interfere in the process of true change. (p. 92)

While Tippett's observations pertain to a group of borderline adolescents, the main point is salient for other clientele—short-term gain is an illusion. The literature clearly shows that long-term benefits are the outcome of experiencing eustress.

In summary, it is clear that stress is not a desirable state in life or in adventure situations. Stress causes long-term negative outcomes, both physiologically and psychologically. How should this information affect a wilderness program? I believe it furthers the case for a eustressful model, one which does not create unnecessary stress for participants. I advocate a model where the inherent stress and risks in adventure activities are acknowledged, and eustress rather than stress occurs.

## The Eustress Paradigm: A Strategy for Decreasing Stress in Wilderness Adventure Programming

The Eustress Paradigm is my method for addressing a basic need of human beings to decrease stress in their lives and invite in health, balance, and well-being. The primary goal is to support clients in engaging in adventures and authentic risk taking which facilitates the experience of eustress. This paradigm is based on feminist adventure education literature (Holzwarth, 1994; Mitten, 1985, 1986, 1992, 1994; Warren, 1985, 1993; Warren & Rheingold, 1993) and on the nine conditions of eustress which were previously outlined. The seven components of this paradigm will

be presented in a narrative example as we follow "Maria" as she travels on a three-day women's canoe outing.

## 1. The Individual as the Beginning Point

Two instructors, Shari and Marissa, offer a women's canoe outing. Both instructors believe in and model these principles:

- A person is complete in and of themselves.
- A person's inner strengths and knowledge are viewed as a resource.
- A person's internal esteem is to be acknowledged and validated.

Shari and Marissa encourage the participants to practice being aware of perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors by having participants self-assess their optimal personal stress levels. Within this framework, the importance of subjective experience is acknowledged. It is an individual's perception which defines experience as pleasant or unpleasant. Therefore, a person does have the ability to convert stress into eustress.

## 2. Preparation for Risk Taking

Before the trip, group members meet and begin the natural process of building community. Shari and Marissa share trip information and logistics with participants. While both instructors are skilled outdoor educators, the "expert instructor" status is discouraged. All participants offer rich experiences and their own expertise. Acknowledging this helps to maintain equitable relationships between participants and instructors.

The instructors model and facilitate the establishment of group norms of emotional and physical safety. Part of this process is to collaboratively discuss and decide upon program goals and objectives. Another important aspect of establishing safety is to share and validate feelings. Specifically, fears are named and discussed. Maria shares that she has a fear of water and hopes to overcome it on the canoe outing. All participants are asked for their interpretations of the words stress, eustress, and risk. Educational information on stress and eustress is shared with participants. This is followed by brainstorming different stress-management techniques individuals can use while on the outing.

## 3. Entrance into a Novel Setting

As the participants enter the novel setting, physical and emotional safety remain a priority. Therefore, no information is withheld from participants. Marissa and Shari do not manipulate perceived risk or actual risk. Major decisions are made through consensus with all voices heard. Participants are encouraged to monitor their stress levels. Maria is discovering that near the water, her stress level is high, yet she is able to function and concentrate on learning paddling skills. She is practicing her stress-management techniques of conscious breathing, focusing her

attention on the beauty of the natural surroundings, and doing a safety check on her life vest.

### 4. Choice

Even though the objectives of the canoe trip are to learn specific canoeing skills and complete a particular route, flexibility of schedule is maintained by offering choices within the structure of a day. Options to all activities are made available unless an issue of safety arises. The instructors do not impose goals upon individuals. Rather, participants self-determine attainable personal goals. Maria's goals are to learn basic paddle strokes, practice her stress-management techniques, spend time on the water in the hope of overcoming her fear, enjoy her surroundings, and make new friends.

### 5. Authentic Risk Taking

In order to support an environment of authentic risk taking, both instructors believe in and model these principles:

- Task completion and noncompletion are not dichotomized as task success and task failure. It is important to remember that both eustress and stress can be felt with either of these outcomes. Therefore, external environmental outcomes are not helpful. Rather, attention must be paid to the internal process of the individual and her subjective interpretation of events.
- Process is valued over task outcome.
- Personal choice and control is maintained, acknowledged, and validated. Interventions without participant approval are reserved for cases of immediate physical danger or intense emotional distress.

Eustress promotes authentic risk taking. For example, Maria is given safety information and skill instruction. She is progressing with her goals and has the ability (physical and emotional skills) to meet the demands placed upon her in this environment. Maria desires and considers it important to meet these demands placed upon her. Both of these conditions help to create an experience of eustress.

Another aspect of eustress is that Maria appraises her current situation as meeting or exceeding her desired state. Initially, Maria felt less safe in the bow of the canoe. She decided that her goal would be to spend one hour a day in the bow as a way to work on this fear. By the third day, she found her comfort level increasing and spent three hours in the bow, even though her feeling of fear was slightly present. Maria perceives this specific risk-taking incident as eustressful because her situation exceeds the original goal of one hour in the bow.

### 6. Appraisal of Experience

The group schedules time for individual and group reflection. An environment of emotional safety is maintained as participants discuss perceptions of events, feelings, stress, and methods used for coping.

### 7. The Individual as the Ending Point

One of the two final conditions of eustress to be addressed is that the individual views the coping activities as enjoyable, regardless of the impact on known stressors. Additionally, the individual derives pleasure from the success of the coping activities. In other words, Maria chose to participate in a supervised canoe outing as a way to cope with the stress of fearing water. She finds the outing very enjoyable, regardless of how it impacts her fear of water. Even though Maria experiences stress while canoeing, she also feels a sense of accomplishment, success, and eustress when the outing is finished. Therefore, this experience for Maria offers both physiological and emotional benefits.

## Conclusion

Stress is a consistent element of wilderness adventures, just as it is a consistent part of life. However, stress should not be manipulated further in the guise of facilitating transformative experiences. Stress is known to cause physiological and psychological damage. To purposefully create stressful situations as a companion to risk taking blatantly fosters an environment of negative outcomes. In addition, this approach also denies the participant personal choice. Since the necessary conditions which facilitate eustress call for self-determination, if a person is denied personal power, the possibility of experiencing eustress is forsaken. To forsake eustress is to invite stress. Risk taking from a position of stress has greater potential for jeopardizing physical and emotional safety. I believe the role of a wilderness instructor is to support authentic risk taking through honoring process, self-determination, and subjective experience. Authentic risk taking is based on a position of power and choice and this has greater potential to lead to eustress.

As eustress is proven to elicit physiological and psychological benefits, I have offered the Eustress Paradigm as a method for increasing eustress in adventure programming. I believe this paradigm is applicable to diverse populations, since a commonality among human beings is the benefit of eustress and the harm of stress. Wilderness instructors and participants in adventure programs have the potential to cultivate eustress to reap profound benefits.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their support, encouragement, and editorial comments: Karen Warren, two anonymous reviewers, Denise Mitten, Rachel Holzwarth, Ellen Cole, Joan Clingan, Lyn Holiday, Elizabeth Peeler, Sara Chase, and Shari Weinstein.

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