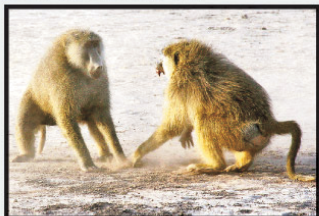


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Are Alpha Males Healthy?

### GETTING TO THE TOP

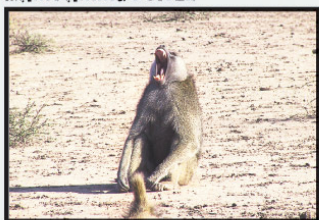


**MALE BABOONS** establish dominance by fighting other males. Confrontations can be noisy and violent.

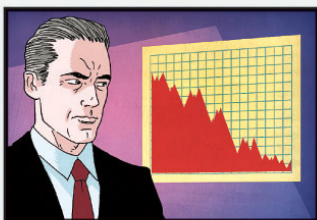


**HUMAN ALPHAS** intimidate with their confidence, brains and maneuvering skills.

### MAINTAINING POWER



**TOP BABOONS** must fight off frequent challengers from their own circle and others. Most stay on top only a few years.

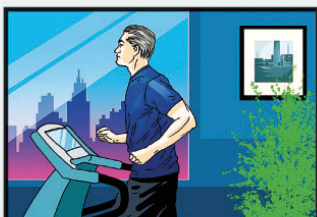


**HUMAN ALPHAS** must fight off frequent challengers from their own circle and others. Most stay on top only a few years.

### LIVING LARGE



**ALPHA BABOONS** get the best food, most personal grooming and their choice of mates. But they also have high levels of testosterone and cortisol, indicating intense stress.



**HUMAN ALPHAS** may enjoy the perks of their position. Exercise, unless taken to extremes, can keep tension in check.

Illustrations by Dominic Bugatto; photos (t-b): Jeanne Altman (2); Catherine Markham

One evening a week, a group of CEOs meets in a Manhattan psychiatrist's office and engages in an ancient ritual. Ostensibly, it is a support group. Inevitably, it becomes a battle for dominance.

"Whenever you put alpha males together, the most aggressive will overpower the others," says T. Byram Karasu, the veteran psychiatrist who has run the sessions for the past 23 years. The fighting is subtle, but it's vicious. "Even giving advice is geared toward lowering the others' self-esteem. Those at the lower end of the group come away doubting themselves, and their testosterone falls. They tell me they can't have sex for three or four days afterward."

Alpha males get the girls, but beta males have fewer stress-related health problems, at least among baboons, according to a recent Princeton study. As Melinda Beck explains on Lunch Break, that appears to have health consequences for humans, too.

It isn't easy being an alpha male. Getting to the top and staying there takes a physical toll.

The latest evidence comes from wild baboons in Kenya's Amboseli basin. Researchers from Princeton and Duke universities studied 125 males in five groups over nine years and found that while the alpha males got the best food and the most mates, they experienced far more stress than the beta males just beneath them in the hierarchy, based on the levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, in fecal samples.

The beta males had almost as many mates and got just as much grooming from others, but they didn't have to spend as much time fighting or following females around to keep other males away.

"Being an alpha is exhausting. I'd rather be a beta," says Laurence Gesquiere, lead author of the study that appeared in the journal *Science* in July.

In the human savannah, where smarts matter more than brute strength, alphas run companies, amass fortunes and dominate any meeting they're in.

They are ambitious, assertive, confident and competitive. "You can smell it in about 30 seconds," says Dr. Karasu, who is psychiatrist-in-chief of Montefiore Medical Center in New York.

While they may appear cool and calm, many human alphas thrive on adrenaline, the hormone that primes the body to fight or flee in times of danger. Those short bursts of power helped our ancestors outrun predators. But if the perceived threat never lets up, the chronic state of alarm increases cortisol, too, and can eventually weaken the immune system, raise blood-pressure, cholesterol and insulin levels, block arteries and spread inflammation.

Some alphas have so-called Type-A personalities, a combination of aggression, impatience and anger first linked to a higher risk of heart disease in the 1960s. Hostility is the main culprit, according to more

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recent research. A study of 1,750 Canadians in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology* last week found that people who displayed signs of hostility—whether they admitted feeling hostile or not—had twice the risk of cardiovascular problems as those who did not. "Not all alpha males are Type A, but the combination can be deadly from a health standpoint," Dr. Karasu says.

**"Some alphas compete with their own children,"** says Eddie Erlandson, a former vascular surgeon who now runs an executive coaching company, Worth Ethic Corp., with his wife, Dr. Ludeman.

## Are Alpha Males Healthy

Women, of course, can be alphas or betas as well, and have the same fight-or-flight response to danger. But some researchers theorize females may experience a “tend-and-befriend” response as well, pumping out extra oxytocin and prolactin, hormones that enhance nurturing. Shielding offspring and blending into the crowd might have enhanced their chances of survival more than running or fighting, the theory goes. The oxytocin surge has been documented in animal studies, but is unproven in humans.

Many alphas are also dedicated to exercise, which helps burn off excess adrenaline and cortisol. But some alphas take exercise, like everything else, to the extreme. “If every runner who passes you makes you pick up your pace, you’re keeping yourself pumped full of adrenaline,” says psychologist Kate Ludeman, co-author of “Alpha Male Syndrome.”

Cardiologists, psychiatrists and executive coaches all say it is critical for alphas to find some way to manage excess stress—be it moderate exercise, sports, yoga, music, meditation, mindfulness training or downtime with family and friends. Some also advise simple deep-breathing exercises, with long exhalations, which can counteract cortisol and increase endorphins, the feel-good brain chemical.

Many alphas find they are happier, healthier and more successful if they learn to temper some of their competitive zeal. “Some alphas compete with their own children,” says Eddie Erlandson, a former vascular surgeon who now runs an executive coaching company, Worth Ethic Corp., with his wife, Dr. Ludeman.

Some primate studies have found that alpha males that survive longest are those who cultivate friendships. That applies to humans as well “with a vengeance,” says Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky, author of “Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers.”

Beta males, by contrast, are nice guys, peacemakers and team players. They make good husbands, fathers and friends. Some experts say they tend to be happier than alphas, since they aren’t driven by the need to be on top. Betas can come in many forms—from competent wingmen to extreme introverts who are so determined to avoid conflict they suffer anxiety of their own.

Many observational studies of people and primates have shown that, in general, it’s more stressful at the bottom of the social hierarchy than the top. Two long-running studies of British civil-service workers found that people in the lowest ranks had many more health problems and were three times as likely to die as the highest-grade administrators in a 10-year period—even though they all had access to health-care services.

To date, there have been few studies assessing whether human alphas or betas are healthier. But interest is exploding in studying how such social and psychological experiences affect human biology—“how they get under our skin,” says Richard Suzman, director of Behavioral and Social Research at the National Institute of Aging, which helped fund the baboon research and is studying how social status affects longevity. The National Institute of Mental Health is using brain scans to track how winning and losing changes brain circuits.

Some of the most intriguing questions involve how and when these traits emerge in childhood. Researchers with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development have observed alpha and beta behavior even in kindergartners and found that the subordinate tots have more cortisol in their saliva. “The question some of us are now looking at is how reversible are these early patterns?” says Stephen Suomi, who directs research on human and primate development at the NICHD. “This is all wild new territory.”

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Kate, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives, who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. Kate has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in wide range of industries. She has coached executives globally on all major continents.

Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic, Earn What You’re Worth, The Corporate Mystic* (now in its 11th printing).



Eddie Erlandson coaches executives to transform entrenched leadership habits, especially leaders who need to make their style more inspiring or more trustworthy. As an accomplished physician, Eddie draws on his knowledge of the physiological aspects of change, he’s also developed strategies from competing in endurance sports that he applies to leadership. He’s worked with executive teams across a number of industries, including consumer products, education, government, high tech, heavy industrial, medical care, pharmaceutical, and the military.

Previously, Eddie served as Chief of Staff at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he also practiced as a vascular surgeon for over 20 years and co-directed a wellness program.

Eddie Erlandson and Kate Ludeman consult both individually and together, and have co-authored *Alpha Male Syndrome* (2006) and *Radical Change, Radical Results* (2003).

They live and work in Austin, Texas.



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