



Men, women and emotions (or why he never tells you how he's feeling!)

Mark Tyrell

He just won't talk! - women's most common complaint

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times. Women everywhere seem to say the same thing about their male partners and it goes like this: 'He just shuts off to emotion! He never tells me how he is feeling!' Or 'He'll leave the room and refuse to talk about it!'

So when Rosemary, a client of mine, started telling me about the difficulties she was having with her partner, I listened sympathetically and let her pour out her frustration without telling her that I had heard it all before. And when she finally came to a stop, I began to explain *why* so many men are uncomfortable exploring their feelings and why this is a good thing!

I think I had her full attention.

Going quiet - emotional upset versus problem solving

Male friends have told me they hate it when a woman asks them during a quiet moment: 'What are you thinking?' Women find this a natural question because women tend to go quiet when they feel hurt or lied to. If a man is quiet, a woman may assume his silence indicates that he is upset. Men, on the other hand, stop communicating when they have a problem to solve.

Understanding better how your partner processes emotions can clear up misunderstandings and bring greater tolerance into your relationship. The fact is that men and women are different in more than just the obvious physical ways.

Emotional arousal is bad for male health

This all reminds me of the old song: 'Why can't a woman be more like a man?' Except in this instance it's: 'Why can't a man be more like a woman?' There are things you need to know about how most men and women relate differently to emotions.

And a prime difference is that men have to protect themselves from emotional arousal for the sake of their health.

The 1970s therapeutic ideal was about 'getting in touch with your feelings.' However, more recent research shows that strong emotion - particularly for men - can be physically dangerous. Women used to be dismissively known as the 'weaker sex' - but in some ways men are actually more vulnerable. Women not only live longer but at every stage of life the male is more likely to die than the female. Even in infancy, premature boys are more likely to die than premature girls.

Rosemary was surprised and relieved to learn that there are sound reasons why her male partner may 'button up'.

Men act, women talk

Firstly, men's brains are wired for action during high emotion, whereas women's brains are wired for talking things over. If a man instinctively knows his anger is likely to lead to action (and possibly regrettable violence) he may try to stop it going that far by putting a lid on it. Or 'clamming up' as his partner may describe it.

Secondly, from an evolutionary perspective men would have had to shut off their emotions while out hunting, so over time it has become natural for them to do so.

But there is a third and even better reason why men typically may shut themselves off more from emotional arousal.

I'm out of here! - the male survival mechanism

In an emotionally-arousing situation, a man's first instinct is to leave and calm down. This is partly due to how emotions affect men. They are a cue to physical action - the consequences of which could be terrible. If a man stays put and becomes very emotional, his blood pressure skyrockets and he is at risk of having a heart attack. It also takes much longer for a man's blood pressure and immune system to return to normal after high emotion than it does for a woman. Therefore a man will instinctively try (without even knowing that this is what he is doing) to protect himself and escape the situation.

Young boys are more stressed by emotion than girls

This difference in male/female emotion processing is evident from a young age. Women need to be more tuned into their emotions than men because they are, more often, the ones who rear children (of course, this is a generalisation and there are always exceptions). One research study showed that young boys were much quicker to try to switch off a recording of a baby crying than young girls were. The researchers at first reasoned that this was because of male insensitivity. But it turned out that the boys had much higher levels of stress hormone in their bloodstreams than the girls did on hearing the emotionally arousing trigger. Men are actually *more sensitive* to emotion and so more likely to avoid it.

This gender difference persists through life and old men are much more likely to die soon after the loss of a partner than an elderly wife when she loses her husband.

Let's have some understanding

The best way to relate to one another is for men to appreciate that a woman needs to off load sometimes and for a woman to know that a man may prefer to talk about practicalities rather than how he is feeling.

So a man, when he realises that his partner is upset or worried about something, can ask her if she would like to talk about it. But then he needs to resist the temptation to offer advice or tell her what to do! Just listen and affirm her feelings.

Conversely, a woman who notices something is up can think twice before asking that frightening question - 'How do you feel?' or before starting to say 'I feel'. A good alternative might perhaps be to say 'It might be a good idea if we do such-and-such about that - This makes it action orientated and therefore less threatening to her male partner. Remember strong emotion physically harms a man and is a cue to action rather than discussion.

Rosemary's relief

As you can imagine, Rosemary felt much happier when she had grasped all this. She suggested that this difference accounts for why far more women than men seek therapy - because they are more comfortable discussing their emotions. Knowledge is power and Rosemary is now confident that her relationship can survive.

View this article online:

[Men, women and emotions – or why he never tells you how he's feeling!](#)

Copyright Uncommon Knowledge Ltd 2006
www.uncommon-knowledge.co.uk