

Emotional Gender Differences

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Things that husbands would love to hear their wives say: “Shouldn’t you be out at the pub drinking with the boys?” or “Sure! A very large motorbike is an excellent idea”. We’re amused because they’re a clear indication of some of the contrasting wants of men and women.

But the Mars / Venus issue has more to do with our emotional upbringing than basic planetary differences. Many businesswomen experience numerous emotional conflicts because our rearing was geared more towards *Stepford Wives* subservience than taking the Martians on in business. And when it comes to the Martians themselves, the world of work is becoming so deeply influenced by feminine (or humane) principles that macho men are losing ground.

The role of the good wife is one of an emotional mop and from very early on little girls learn that their job is to handle the feelings of the family. Boys on the other hand are taught to disregard their emotions as ‘pink-blouse’ stuff. So girls learn to express their feelings and boys to suppress them. But neither is a healthy way of dealing with one’s emotional life.

Given the changing landscape in both our social and commercial worlds, an understanding of differences helps men and women build stronger relationships and reduce unnecessary conflict. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in our patterns of communication.

Communication expresses the richness of our thinking as well as the depth of our emotional and spiritual lives and is directly influenced by gender conditioning.

Women and men communicate for different reasons. In her book *That’s Not What I Meant*, Deborah Tannen says women build relationships through communication and men communicate for information and acknowledgement. That’s why when a woman gets home after a trying time at the office she wants to tell her spouse about the day’s events. He assumes she wants advice and expects to be appreciated for his bright ideas. Often it will end in an argument with neither need having being met.

When it comes to quantity, men and women are also worlds apart. Alan & Barbara Pease, authors of *Why Men don’t Listen & Women can’t Read Maps*, claim that on average women need to get through about 20 000 expressions in a day. Men, on the other hand, only work their way through some 7 000 words or expressions. So, when he gets home quiet time with the newspaper is appealing to him but she may have half her quota yet to go. This is why men often tinker with the motorcar or have daily rituals such as watering the garden or checking swimming pool filters. He knows she’s unlikely to join him while he’s busy with ‘male’ activities, so he can quietly bolster himself for the inevitable word onslaught to come.

This difference is easily explained by cavemen theories where women gathered and men hunted. Women operated in communities and were the earliest botanists. They needed to communicate in order to share information about plants, grains, fruits etc., and teaching was passed on verbally through the generations. However hunting is an occupation requiring silence and it is believed that this is the reason men can seem challenged in the verbal department.

Traditionally, when women feel emotional they call a girlfriend and natter. This only lets off a little bit of steam. But because some of the pressure has been released, they may feel better but it hasn't necessarily solved the problem. On the other hand, feelings that are suppressed tend to act out badly and that's why men who suppress their feelings can have a short fuse. They may be calm and collected at work but then go home and kick the dog!

One of the greatest difficulties this emotional suppression poses for men is that they don't learn a language to express how they are feeling. Anger is the only socially acceptable emotion for men to feel and consequently many men believe that only two emotional states exist; anger or indifference. So men aren't purposely being evasive in conversations about feelings, they simply haven't yet learnt the vocabulary to express themselves.

Regardless of gender, feelings exist as messages. They are giving us feedback about the everyday choices we are making and problems emerge when either gender attempts to deal with them the traditional way. Yet if both men and women re-train their thinking by understanding the real functions of emotions many of the conflicts would dissolve.

In *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone*, an innovative emotional dictionary is provided to help both men and women decipher the messages of their feelings. As a feedback mechanism emotions are like warning lights in a motorcar. When something is wrong, feeling dreadful alerts us to pay attention and do something. As soon as one deals with the situation that caused the discomfort, the bad feeling subsides.

Looking at the emotional dictionary it becomes clear that emotions provide as specific a message as words do in any language. For example anger is a message telling you, you aren't getting your own way. Knowing this you can make decisions. Are you prepared to back down or not? If not re-negotiate with the other person rather than constantly compromising your position.

While many men find this easy to accept, women often find the idea of getting one's own way difficult. Traditional rearing demands that women keep giving; even if this means giving up or giving in. Men on the other hand tend to have much less difficulty in this area. From their upbringing they see it to be their right to get their own way. No conflict here.

The ability to get one's own way is the crux of an emotionally intelligent person. But (and that's a big BUT) it all depends on how you go about it. For many of the fairer sex, this too can be hard to swallow because many perceive the idea to smack of selfishness and manipulation and being labelled 'selfish' is one of the worst expletives for a woman. It means she isn't doing her 'giving' job and this hits deeply at the core. But, for any woman wanting success, being 'appropriately selfish' is essential - unless, of course, she wants to drive herself cuckoo with the busy Superwomen stuff.

Another aspect of this 'giving' behaviour is that it separates the sexes when it comes to what makes us feel good about ourselves. A woman's self-esteem is based on what she gives and a man's on what he acquires. That's why we have the stereotype of the older woman bitter and twisted about her mid-life divorce. After years of giving her life away to him, it's hard to accept that he'd prefer a bimbo. But he's just fulfilling his need for a newer acquisition. No different really from trading in his car! Frivolous perhaps but there's ample evidence to show an element of truth in the stereotype.

For our own sanity women need to put this giving thing into perspective. All human beings have a need to make a contribution in whatever area and this is what drives our passion. But it doesn't mean we can give to everyone who makes demands. Once women have found their passion and channel their energy into this area, they become formidable because they have to be discerning. But so much feminine talent is wasted because of scattering one's energy by trying to please everyone.

Another area where the touchy-feely stuff separates the genders is in the area of non-verbal communication. From psychology we know that 93% of what we communicate is revealed by what we don't say. And it is through the non-verbals that we communicate attitude, mood and feelings. Because women are schooled from a young age to run the emotional life of the family, they are better attuned to what's not being said.

But although women may be better at reading the signals they can get into hot water here. Many women confuse mind reading with non-verbal communication and this is very baffling to men. It certainly makes for some interesting post dinner party analysis, but the problem with the non-verbal is that it's wide open to misinterpretation. And this doesn't help problematic communication with the already estranged Martians.

Even in what women say, there are distinct differences. Generally women are over-polite and keep apologising. As an example women will say things like "I'm sorry to interrupt you because I know you're busy but would you mind awfully if I took the afternoon off to see the doctor and I'll finish what I've been working on tomorrow." Already at the apology stage the man is tearing his hair out because men are far more direct. Rather say something like "I'm taking the afternoon off to see the doctor."

So as many of the differences between Mars and Venus have at their core the disparate emotional rearing of children, there's great hope for our relationships. Both parties can relearn emotional skills and therefore do things differently. Already many women have taken on much of the traditional male responsibility. And this coupled with the advent of the Millennium Man means that us girls may soon even hear things from our men like "Let's spend the afternoon shopping together" or "Darling I'm feeling so tender about you, I could cry."

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