

# How women and men communicate differently (Part 1)

Question:

My wife and I really struggle with communication. We are so different in our communication styles and sometimes we just don't get each other. We've tried reading books and doing what they suggest, like reflective listening, but it still isn't working very well. Do you have some other suggestions to help us work through things better?

Answer:

Communication is a critical part of a good relationship, and it sounds like you've been working on it, which is the first step in the right direction. It might also help to know some of the differences in how men and women communicate and how to use what Dr. John Lund, therapist and author, calls "content communication," which helps eliminate misunderstandings.

As you have probably noticed, women typically want to talk more than men, and that's why you may sometimes feel like you've reached your limit long before your wife is done. This is normal, and your wife should not feel like it's because you don't care or you're not interested. She needs to understand it's a guy thing.

Lund says that communication signals involve much more than just words. We communicate with our body language, facial expression and tone of voice too. Men, on average, use 7,000 communication signals per day and women use 21,000 (see Pease, Alan and Barbara, "Why Men Don't Listen and Why Women Can't Read Maps," New York: Broadway Books, 2001). So it's no wonder that men hit their limit long before women do. By the time you're done, she's just getting started.

Another way that men and women communicate differently is that efficiency of words is very important for men, but not so much for women. Lund has found that men tend to become impatient with inefficiency from other people, and then they start to finish sentences for others and interrupt. This is something you can be aware of when talking to you wife. It's also true that women interrupt, but for a different reason. They usually interrupt to add more detail which, by the way, men perceive as unnecessary.

Does your wife ever feel like she has to pry information out of you? This could be because of your need for efficiency and her need for more detail. Also notice that when you talk, it's probably mostly about giving information and your wife will probably talk more about feelings and emotions as a way to process them. Neither is right or wrong, it's just something you both need to be aware of when trying to connect with each other.

One last difference is something Lund calls personalization. You may have heard it said that men are good at compartmentalizing — taking all of the experiences throughout the day, putting each of them into separate compartments and not letting them mix together. Most women are not good at this.

Personalization is when women make connections with all the information they process, and then they integrate this information and internalize it. Here's an example. Let's say you're having dinner with some friends (at their house) and you say to your wife, "Wow, this pie is really good, don't you think?" Because your wife personalizes, she's thinking, "He wants me to make pie like this." She has gone through an entire process of connecting your statement with a lot of her own thoughts and then applying it all to herself.

If she had said the same thing to you, you probably would have thought, "Yep, good pie." This is also why you and your wife could have a small argument in the morning and you're OK with being intimate that night but she isn't. You have compartmentalized (it's two completely different situations) and she has internalized (the two situations get mixed together and affect each other). This tendency towards personalization sometimes means women see things that aren't really there.

This is something we have to work on. We have to learn to step back and make sure what we are thinking is accurate.

Now, think about a time when your wife asked you to go somewhere with her and your response was, "Yah sure" but your tone of voice was not very excited. Your wife is getting a mixed message because your communication signals (words and tone of voice) don't match up. So which one does she believe? We pay more attention to facial expressions and body language (55 percent) than to tone of voice (37 percent) or the actual words (8 percent) (see Smith, Dennis and Williamson, L. Keith, "Interpersonal Communication," Dubuque, Iowa: W.C. Brown Co., 1981). Your wife would probably assume that you didn't want to go because she believes your tone of voice more than your words. But it's still a guessing game, and we get it wrong a lot.

This is where what Lund calls "content communication" comes in handy. It's really quite a simple idea. All you have to do is completely ignore all communication signals except for the actual words. This means that no matter how much your body language and tone of voice conflict with your words, we only believe your words.

You and your wife would have to agree ahead of time to communicate this way. Lund, in his book "For All Eternity," says, "As content communicators, you must own your words and your feelings. Remember, you are under obligation to say what you mean and to be held accountable for your words."

Through several studies he has done, he found that if we pay attention to all of the communication signals, we misunderstand each other at least 20 percent of the time. But if we use content communication, we misunderstand only three out of every 200 communications. One of my clients

has tried this with her husband, and he loves it. He will ask if she wants to go to a movie and reminds her to use content communication — then he trusts that he's getting an honest answer.

Changing the way you communicate is difficult because it's hard to override your subconscious habits and hold back your responses to body language and tone of voice. It is going to take some practice to get there, but I think this is a great place to start. Also make sure to download the validating conversations worksheet from our [website](#). Couples who know how to have validating conversations can work through almost anything.

You can do this.

## How women and men communicate differently (Part 2)

Question:

I read your article last week on communication. My husband and I do pretty well, but we often get into a fight when I try to tell him about something that's bothering me. I try not to sound attacking, but he always seems to get defensive and then I wish I hadn't said anything. Should I just keep my frustrations in and deal with them myself or is there a way I can approach him that won't create conflict?

Answer:

I don't recommend that you just keep your frustrations in and try to ignore them or sweep them under the rug. There are kind, honest, healthy ways to discuss what bothers you that won't create conflict. Hopefully you got the worksheet on [Validating Communication Formula](#) from our website last week. It is a great place to start.

It might also help to learn some basics about men and communication. According to Dr. John Lund, author and psychologist, men are naturally defensive all the time, which means when you try to talk to your husband about something that's bothering you, his initial reaction will almost always be defensive. They are subconsciously programmed to defend, which makes sense because of their protector role. They also have fear around not being good enough, like we all do.

If you have something you want him to work on, you might want to start the conversation with something he does well or that you love about him. Or start by asking questions about how he feels about the situation. Listen to him and honor and respect his right to see the situation the way he does. This will ease his fear and make him feel validated.

It's always a good idea to start every conversation with some validation.

Then, most men want to know three things about a conversation before it starts. If you will tell your husband these three things up front, both of you will be happier with the outcome.

John Gottman, a leading authority on relationships, wrote the book "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1999). In it he writes about 650 couples that he studied for up to 14 years and how starting conversations right affected their relationships. He found that "96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first 3 minutes! A harsh startup simply dooms you to failure. So if you begin a discussion that way, you might as well pull the plug, take a breather, and start over." Try these three things the next time you start a conversation with your husband and see if it doesn't go much smoother.

### **1. Is this going to be painful?**

Nobody likes to be blindsided by criticism. Think about what you want to tell your husband and mentally rate it on a scale from 1-10, 10 being something he would be very hurt by. Let's say you decide it's a 4. You could approach him by saying something like, "Honey, I would like to talk to you about something and I would say it's a 4 (so it's not a big deal and won't hurt). When would be a good time to do that?"

He then has the option to talk to you now or giving you a time later that would be better for him. Asking a permission question will lessen his defensiveness and make him feel respected. If it's not going to be very painful, most of the time he'll want to talk about it right now, but if you've given it a pretty high score, he might want time to prepare himself emotionally to hear what you have to say.

He might also have a lot on his mind or be in the middle of a project right now, so no matter what the score, it would be better for him to talk about it later. However, if he decides to talk later, tell him not to worry or second guess what it is about and start getting defensive before he even knows. Let him know there is nothing to worry about until then. Ask him for a time within the next 24 hours and make sure it happens.

### **2. How long is it going to take?**

Men use a third fewer words than women, so they hit information overload long before a woman is done talking. This causes them to tune out and even feel trapped by a long conversation. Decide beforehand how much time you think you'll need (keep it short) and let him know. So again, you might start your conversation by saying, "Honey, I would like to talk to you about something and I would say it's a 4. It will take about 15 minutes. When would be a good time to do that?" It is very important for you to stay within the time limit you give him. He needs to trust that when you say 15 minutes, you don't really mean an hour. Give him a realistic time frame and stick to it. If you do this every time you talk, he will trust you more and he will feel more respected.

### **3. What do you want from me when this conversation is over?**

Men are also natural problem solvers, and this shows up in most conversations. When a woman talks to a man about something that's bothering her, he automatically tries to solve the problem or fix the situation. He even feels responsible to do this. Most men get bothered when their wife isn't

happy because they feel subconsciously responsible for it. Usually women just want to be heard and understood and don't expect anything.

Be careful not to expect your husband to be able to read your mind on this though, and you also must know what you want before starting the conversation. Some ideas of what you might want are solutions, feedback, his opinion or even just to listen. Make sure you clearly communicate what you want up front. When you ask for something, make sure you are focused on future behavior (that he has control over) and not just complaining about his past behavior (which he cannot fix or control).

If you put these tips together, your conversation might now start like this, "Honey, I would like to talk to you about something and I would say it's a 4. It will only take about 15 minutes and I just want you to listen to how I'm feeling and do one small specific thing differently moving forward. Is this a good time or when would be better?" When the time comes to have this conversation, follow the communication formula worksheet step by step.

It would be amazing to reduce your misunderstandings from 40 out of every 200 to only three out of every 200, and Lund says that making sure you start this way and say exactly what you mean (using content communication from last week) can do that. Start practicing this with easy conversations about a topic that doesn't have too much negative emotion around it. Work your way up to the touchy subjects. You may even want to practice with visualization first.

You can talk about anything if you come from trust and love instead of fear and it won't create conflict. It just takes practice.

You can do this!

## **How women and men communicate differently (Part 3)**

Question:

Every time I read or hear something about improving communication I try it with my husband and we do better for a little while, but then we have a disagreement and always seem to fall back into our old ways. How can we stop this cycle? I know we won't ever be perfect at it, but how can we not fall into our same traps all the time?

Answer:

You are definitely not alone on this. It is human nature to slide back into old habits, even if we know better. A study in the Oct. 20, 2005 issue of Nature, by Ann Graybiel, a professor at MIT, showed that neuron activity in the brain gets set when we form a habit. Changing that behavior is difficult, because the brain's neuro pathways want to keep doing what they've always done.

But you do have the power to change. The first step is becoming aware of your subconscious habits of thinking and the traps that trigger your old behavior. (You may want to take the [Fear Assessment](#) on my website, to see your subconscious programs and how they affect you.) In this last communication article I want to share 5 common pitfalls of communication that many couples struggle with, which again come from Dr. John Lund.

### **1. Asking Leading Questions**

There are a couple of ways we do this. One is we ask for someone's opinion when we don't really want an answer, like if you ask your husband if you should buy a new coffee table when you've already decided you want to buy it. Another way is when we ask a question hoping for a specific answer, like while driving home, a woman says to her husband, "Do you want to stop and get a treat on our way?" and he takes the question literally and responds, "No thanks, I'd rather just get home." Well, she's hurt because she wanted to stop! What she should say is, "I would like to stop and get a treat, is that o.k. with you?"

We have to watch for a subconscious tendency to do this, because it is really immature game playing. Just shoot straight and ask for what you want.

### **2. Mixed Messages**

There are 3 ways that we send messages (communication signals) to each other: facial expressions or body language, tone of voice, and the actual words. Sometimes these communications signals don't match up and these are a mixed message. For example, if I have asked my son several times to clean his room and he still hasn't done it, I might say to him in a tense voice, "Will you please clean your room?" He then tells me not to get so mad and I respond, "I said please." The negative tone of voice and the positive words don't match up. We pay the most attention to facial expressions and body language, tone of voice is second, and the actual words are last. My son hears my tone of voice and that discounts the word "please." So we need to work on making sure our body language and tone of voice agree and hold each other accountable for our words only (content communication like we talked about last week).

### **3. Don't Ask If You Don't Want to Know**

This is a common area where women may not communicate clearly. Think about asking your husband if he thinks you should rearrange the living room furniture (when you already know you want to) and he says no. Now, you have created a problem. You asked his opinion, but you are going to reject it, because it isn't the answer you wanted. According to Dr. Lund, men are known to defend their opinion even if it's not the best idea, because they are really subconsciously defending their ego. So, it would be better to tell your husband that you are

going to move the furniture and ask for his help doing it. Another option is to say upfront, "I'd like to move the furniture. You have some really good insights though, so will you give me your opinion, but then support whatever decision I make?"

#### **4. Hint Dropping**

Again, women are more notorious for this than men. You might comment about how bad the garbage smells, hoping your husband will jump up and take the garbage out. Or you might mention several times how amazing your friend's husband is because he cooks dinner every Sunday, hoping your husband will start doing that. In general, husbands want their wives to be happy and would rather just be told in a loving way what you would appreciate from them. Hint dropping can be game playing and you will always build a better relationship if you shoot straight.

#### **5. If You Have to Ask, It Doesn't Count**

Another way to say it is, "If you really care about me, you would know." This is probably the most common and most detrimental communication pitfall, and we hear this from our clients all the time. What you're really expecting is someone to read your mind and that is not realistic. Movies and other media have created an expectation of a spouse who always knows the right things to say and do at exactly the right time, but it doesn't happen that way in real life. Expecting someone to read your mind and know what you want is again, playing games. You must ask for what you want and need and then appreciate having a spouse who is a great responder.

The bottom line is that we all have fears, we all make mistakes and we all want to be loved and valued as we are. You and your spouse have different challenges, weaknesses and faults, but you both have good intentions to treat each other right. Neither of you wants to say the wrong thing and start arguments. You must give your spouse the benefit of the doubt more often and remember to see them as the same as you. You are-both struggling students in the classroom of life, doing the best you can with what you know, with the exact same intrinsic value. No one is worse and no one is the bad guy. Be patient with yourself and each other, because behavioral changes can't happen overnight. Keep practicing and commit to forgiving each other when you mess up and over time - **you can do this** – you really can create a better relationship.