

Keeping In Touch

June 2006

The Village Employee Assistance Program

The Differences Between Men and Women

Relationships between men and women are not impossible or necessarily difficult. Problems simply arise when we expect or assume the opposite sex should think, feel or act the way we do. The challenge facing men and women is to become aware of their identities, to accept their differences, and to live their lives fully and as skillfully as possible. To do this we must first understand the ways we are different. We must avoid trying to change others to suit our needs. The following illustrates some important differences between men and women. These differences are not absolute, but describe how men and women are in most situations most of the time.

Problem-solving

While men and women can solve problems equally well, their approach and their process are often quite different. For most women, sharing and discussing a problem presents an opportunity to explore, deepen or strengthen the relationship with the person they are talking with. Women are usually more concerned about how problems are solved than merely solving the problem itself. For women, solving a problem can profoundly impact whether they feel closer and less alone, or whether they feel distant and less connected. The process of solving a problem can strengthen or weaken a relationship.

Men approach problems in a very different manner than women. For most men, solving a problem presents an opportunity to demonstrate their competence, their strength of resolve, and their commitment to a relationship. How the problem is solved is not nearly as important as solving it effectively and in the best possible manner. Men have a tendency to dominate and to assume authority in a problem-solving process. They set aside their feelings provided the dominance hierarchy was agreed upon in advance and respected. They are often distracted and do not attend well to the quality of the relationship while solving problems.

Some of the more important differences can be illustrated by observing groups of young teenage boys and groups of young teenage girls when they attempt to find their way out of a maze. A group of boys generally establish a hierarchy or chain of command with a leader who emerges on his own or through demonstrations of ability and power. Boys explore the maze using scouts while remaining in distant proximity to each other. Groups of girls tend to explore the maze together as a group without establishing a clear or dominant leader. Relationships tend to be co-equal. Girls tend to elicit discussion and employ "collective intelligence" to the task of discovering a way out. Girls tend to work their way through the maze as a group. Boys tend to search and explore using structured links and a chain of command.

Thinking

While men and women can reach similar conclusions and make similar decisions, the process they use can be quite different and in some cases can lead to entirely different outcomes. In general, men and women consider and process information differently.

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Differences continued on back

In his bestselling book, "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," John Gray writes, "Without the awareness that we are supposed to be different, men and women are often at odds with each another. We become angry and frustrated with the opposite sex because we have forgotten this important truth. Men mistakenly expect women to think, communicate and react the way men do; women mistakenly expect men to feel, communicate and respond the way women do. We have forgotten that men and women are supposed to be different."

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Differences *continued from front*

problems all at once. They take a broad or “collective” perspective, and view elements in a task as interconnected and interdependent. Women are prone to become overwhelmed with complexities that “exist”, or may exist, and may have difficulty separating their personal experience from problems.

Men tend to focus on one problem at a time or a limited number of problems at a time. They have

an enhanced ability to separate themselves from problems and minimize the complexity that may exist. Men come to understand and consider problems one piece at a time. They take a linear or sequential perspective, and view elements in a task as less interconnected and more independent. Men are prone to minimize and fail to appreciate subtleties that can be crucial to successful solutions.

Memory

Women have an enhanced ability to recall memories that have strong emotional components. They can also recall events or experiences that have similar emotions in common. Women are very adept at recalling information, events or experiences in which there is a common emotional theme.

Men tend to recall events using strategies that rely on reconstructing the experience in terms of elements, tasks or activities that took place. Profound experiences that are associated with competition or physical activities are more easily recalled.

Sensitivity

There is evidence to suggest that a great deal of the sensitivity that exists within men and women has a physiological basis. It has been observed that in many cases, women have an enhanced physical alarm response to danger or threat. Their autonomic and sympathetic systems have a lower threshold of arousal and greater reactivity than men.

At the heart of sensitivity is our capacity to form, appreciate and maintain relationships that are rewarding. Even here there are important differences. For men, what demonstrates a solid relationship is quite different from that of most women. Men feel closer and validated through shared activities. Such activities include sports, competition, outdoor activities or sexual activities that are decidedly active and physical. While both men and women can appreciate and engage in these activities they often have preferential differences. Women, on the other hand, feel closer and validated through communication, dialogue and intimate sharing of experience, emotional content and personal perspectives. Many men tend to find such sharing and involvement uncomfortable, if not, overwhelming.

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Counselor Column



Pat Olson, LPPC

The Village Family Service Center

Question: *Sometimes when I am talking to my husband I feel like we come from different planets because we have such different ways of looking at things. How can I help him to understand where I'm coming from?*

Pat Olson: Many difficulties in communication between men and women can be understood by looking at gender differences in conversational styles. Men and women operate in two very different social worlds. Learning the differences can reduce the misunderstandings and provide a framework for a common language.

Men seem to live in a world of competition and seek opportunities to display their competence and skills. Men will rarely ask for directions or advice as this puts them in a “you know more than I do” position.

Women tend to be more cautious but persistently seek intimacy and conversation. They want emotional support, cooperation, and praise. Asking for directions means support and conversation.

Men need to gain understanding of why women talk on and on about a problem with friends

with no advice or criticism. The women are interacting to gain support, not solutions. Women need to understand that men enjoy the competitive process and seek solutions to what they perceive as a problem.

When women have a problem they get upset when men interrupt and offer a solution. What they want is to be listened to and supported. Men, on the other hand, can't understand why women get upset, when they are only trying to help.

The book, “Women’s Ways of Knowing,” by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, uses the term “way of knowing” to describe communication styles. The “believing approach” is used to describe women’s communication style. It involves empathizing with the speaker to cooperatively assimilate the truth together. Women tend to like to talk more about family, friends and relationships. They describe men as using more of an “adversarial or doubting approach.” Men tend to be more critical thinkers and enjoy the intellectual fame, the arguing and the competition. They enjoy lively discussions about sports, politics or professional issues.

When looking at the differences, I think all will agree that every person needs to use both “ways of knowing.” Both are valuable skills we can learn from each other and can help us to develop relationships that are pleasing to both men and women.