

Gender Perspectives in Marriage: Creating Security by Reducing Shame and Fear

Part 2: Reducing Fear and Shame with Compassion

Perhaps you have seen the New Yorker cartoon of a cavewoman saying to her bewildered looking caveman partner: "We need to talk." The thinking bubble over his head says. "Uh-oh." The cartoon caption reads: "The Emergence of Language". It brilliantly illustrates the age-old problem of how men and women relate differently to each other. In Part 1 of the article on gender difference in marriage, connecting and sense of security was discussed. In short, men seem to feel more connected through activity than women and women more connected in conversation than men. Taking these ideas a step further, let's look at how men and women differ in how they perceive, receive and experience emotion.

Gender research has discovered that men and women experience emotion differently from birth. Infant girls can hold eye contact longer than baby boys and show more distress (fear) when left alone. Boys feel less pain and fear than girls, yet have hair-trigger propensity to hyper-arousal to any stimulation. An infant boy's intermittent eye contact is believed to be his way to stay in contact without feeling overwhelmed. Studies show that parent gaze into the eyes of their little girls 50% more than little boys. A long gaze into girls' eyes can predictably elicit a smile more than with boys who glance away. Parents instead tend to wave toys, tickle them to stimulate boys to get a smile. Feelings of shame may be unknowingly elicited when parents do not understand the boy's need for smaller doses of eye contact. This can occur when they stop interacting altogether when the boy's gaze turns away. By not staying in contact in other ways, like tickling or waving a toy, these parents reinforce the shame response in boys.

Studies show that on average adult women experience **fear** more strongly than men. Adult men feel **shame** more strongly than women. The exchange of feelings is the lifeblood of relationships. So, if women are more sensitive to fear and men to shame, then the fear-shame point of contact may be an important place to understand male female connection. Most of the fear in women and shame in men is unconscious and outside awareness.

For example a husband fails to call his wife to let her know he is going to stay later at his buddy's house, and there is a resulting quarrel when he gets home. When she asks "where have you been?" he may be feeling so scolded or ashamed. He does not recognize that behind his wife's anger is fear of him being in an accident or fear of being alone. He may respond defensively with: "I was only an hour late, you knew where I was. Don't be so controlling!" In his angry response, she may not recognize that he felt scolded and ashamed by her question and feel her own worry was dismissed by him. The end result is disconnection and repetition of this pattern will be an erosion of the love between them.

Staying connected requires men to be sensitive to, and recognize fear in women. In response to a woman's fear they need to be compassionate. Many men first of all do not recognize a woman's fear and when they do, they are often dismissive of it. When they do see it, they may considerate it as irrational or weak. Sometimes a woman's fear is disguised. Many women respond to his lack of sensitivity to their fear with an angry verbal criticism. The response they may want from their man is comfort and protection when fearful. The woman's reaction is unknowingly thwarting comfort because he will likely withdraw or stone-wall when criticized.

For women to stay connected emotionally during a quarrel, it is essential for them to be able recognize shame in men. Many women do not see how hurt and upset men can get when they are feeling scolded or ashamed because the male response is usually silence. Many women who feel unsupported complain or nag about an issue. This does not encourage cooperation. It brings disengagement. Men often feel inadequate in the face of a criticism. In protection of themselves they stone-wall or withdraw. Men have higher heart rates than women when experiencing conflict on average. Like looking away from a long gaze when over-stimulated in infancy, it is common for men to withdraw from difficult conversations when upset in adulthood. When a man shuts down or withdraws, many women experience this reaction as rejection. If a woman recognizes a man's shame, she will find compassion to be much more effective than criticism or ridicule to get cooperation, protection or connection.

So why is this "attack-withdraw" pattern so widespread in couples? Perhaps it is because being more compassionate requires each to acknowledge a feeling in the other that is less present in themselves. Adding to this difficulty to acknowledge another's feeling is that when upset, one is often self protective. It is difficult for any of us to be compassionate to another when overwhelmed by our own feelings. Yet,

the most successful couples know how to be compassionate when they feel the least like it.

Men: How Compassionate are you?

The greatest fear for most women is of isolation. In their book, *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking About It*, authors Patricia Love and Steven Stosny suggest the following things that men do when they do not recognize a woman's vulnerability to fear:

- Leave her alone at home a lot – to do housework, child care etc. so she feels she is the only one responsible.
- Leave her alone in her dreams – to have a nice home, a loving family, to be treated as an equal, to be romantic, to be respected in her work
- Leave her outside of your work life – Workaholics often feel entitled to relax in their own home without regard to the impact of their absence from home on their relationship.
- Leave her alone in bed – men take the fun out of sex by confusing sex with intimacy, only caring about his own orgasm, being unsubtly affectionate in order to get sex, making crude remarks, rushing things, neglecting her.
- Leave her alone because of your depression – male depression is significantly under diagnosed and untreated because of lack of identification and male shame.
- Leave her alone in her competence – when women are very successful in work or home life endeavours rather than feeling proud and happy for them, some men feel ashamed about their own shortcomings. Then they withhold praise and feel resentment.
- Leave her alone with others – girlfriends, colleagues, children, work or hobbies cannot fill the void in a woman's heart when her partner is unavailable and leaves her with her fears of isolation.

Men Can Improve the Relationship without Talking but Doing the Following:

- At Home – acknowledge the joint responsibility, appreciate all she does, do your share, do chores in a timely fashion, be willing to pay for maintenance, notice improvements she makes, pick up after yourself and others.
- Her Dreams – keep them in mind when making decisions, ask about them, notice how her dreams are not exactly the same as yours, understand that you have the ability to make her extremely happy or unhappy, take pleasure in fulfilling and honouring her dreams.
- Outside Work Life – suggest and plan activities that include her, weekly enjoyable time together, daily routines where you are together – morning coffee, reading the paper, affectionate touching.

- In Bed – pay attention to her when sex is not the motivation, tell her she is sexy, beautiful, attractive, not as a form of foreplay but when not expected – email, text, notes around the house, notice when she is not satisfied and become an expert in arousing her.
- Your Depression – acknowledge any symptoms you might have. Anger is depression turned outward. Get help for this highly-treatable condition. This will go a long way to improving your relationship.
- Her Competence – Expand your view of your role as protector and provider beyond money. You can be provider of compassion through doing things for her. This can give her more confidence, become more competent, and more responsibilities follow.

Attention women: Before you print this off and hand it to your partner/husband to read and heed, remember change must begin with you. Besides, you may shame him and it will likely backfire. And all men: The purpose here is to help you feel compassionate, not guilty.

Women: How Compassionate are you?

According to research done by Patricia Love and Jo Robinson for their book *Hot Monogamy*, women did not know the following things about what men want.

1. Most women did not know how much it pleases a man to please the woman in his life – many men live to please her.
2. Women can see easily see how frightening men are to them because of the threat of physical abuse, but do not recognize their own power to evoke shame.
3. What women often interpret as withdrawn, uncaring men are men overwhelmed by criticism and unhappiness coming from their partner.

Here are the things women do that does not recognize the vulnerability of men to shame according to Patricia Love and Steven Stosny.

- Excluding him from important decisions.
- Interrupting and correcting what he said.
- Questioning his judgement.
- Giving unsolicited advice.
- Ignoring his advice rather than discussing your opinion about it.
- Ignoring his needs, Condescending, Belittling his work.
- Globalizing: “Men are not capable of understanding this. It’s a woman thing.”

- Playing Therapist: “You are trying to make up for your bad relationship with your father.”
- Acting like the expert on all relationships.
- Gestures of Hostility or Exasperation: Rolling eyes, eyebrow lifting, smirk, gasp, “the look”.
- Sarcasm, Ridicule, Criticizing him in front of others.

Many women do not recognize that their critical behaviour is demeaning. Many women believe: “I am just trying to make him a better person.” Criticism can do great harm to relationships. If a woman wants cooperation, or closeness, compassion for her man is more effective. It is essential for women to recognize that most men really do want to please the woman is his life. Most men want to know they measure up in their partner’s mind.

Women Can Improve the Relationship by Doing the Following:

- Believe in him, notice his good points as you did when you fell in love with him.
- Help him be a good lover. Let him know how and what pleases you.
- Help him make you happy. Telling him how unhappy you are may not help. Focus on how he makes you happy and he will do more of it.
- Accept that he too has the best interests of the children at heart when you disagree about parenting issues. Respectfully negotiate with each other recognizing and appreciating the others perspective.
- Let him know what he does that makes you feel safe and secure.
- Let him know you appreciate his work.
- Accept apologies in a behaviour form if a verbal apology is very difficult. Some men who were shamed as a boy by making a forced verbal apology will be much more sincere and genuine when allowed to make an apology through their actions.