

The Top 10 Differences between Men and Women or How to Save Your Relationship by Understanding the Opposite Sex

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June, 2009

Have you heard that I have heel marks in front of my office door? They're from the shoes of a husband being dragged into couples counseling by his wife.

The wife complained about her husband not listening, not sharing, not caring, or not being able to express emotions. I really felt for that husband, who I know was ill-equipped to do these things. I know that men do not have the "wiring" in their brains for these behaviors, as women do, and boys and men have these behaviors conditioned out of them from an early age, where girls and women get encouraged and rewarded for them.

The husband and wife just don't understand each other – and rightfully so! How many of us have had training in how to understand the other sex? Although men and women are something like 95% the same in terms of their biology, the other 5%, plus major differences in how they get socialized, can make all the difference, especially within a relationship.

Let's look at 10 differences that are all-important.

***Disclaimer:** The information below describes tendencies and patterns within and across the sexes, which may not be present in all individuals. Your mileage may vary.*

1. All Stressed Up and Nowhere to Go

Men and women manage stress in significantly different ways. Both men and women have a built-in "fight or flight" mechanism, where our brain reacts instinctively when we are under significant stress (attack, confrontation, etc.). If we can get away, or take flight, we do. If not, we try to fight. These actions are automatic and instinctual – something you can't change easily.

However, while men and women share this biological instinct, it is far more prominent in men. Further, in everyday life, it gets expressed by men either avoiding something (flight) or becoming aggressive and angry (fight). Does this sound familiar?

Women, on the other hand, manage stress through a "tend and befriend" process. That is, they draw others near, attempt to care for them, and call upon friends and other supporters to help them. This gets expressed when a woman feels the need to talk things over with a friend, a relative, or a (hapless) husband or boyfriend. Am I getting warmer?

Now imagine two people living together where one wants to talk about things to manage stress and the other disappears (literally or figuratively) or gets irritable when under stress.

2. Fear This!

What causes stress in men and women? What do they fear the most? You guessed it, significantly different things!

Women tend to fear feeling isolated from others, especially their partner or support group, or sensing the possibility of deprivation, not having enough food, shelter, money, etc. In my opinion, these are all very reasonable fears and stem from our drive to survive.

Men, on the other hand, don't typically fear isolation or deprivation. They fear feeling shamed, especially related to failing at being a provider, protector, lover, or parent. Obviously, these are not life-threatening fears, like those of women. These fears get socialized or conditioned into men. Men truly fear these over almost anything. "Death before dishonor" does not typically represent how women feel, but very much represents how men view things. Men and boys experience this? throughout most of their lives, coming from their dads, coaches, teachers, bosses, friends, and, yes, their moms, girlfriends, and wives, too.

Imagine two people living together where one feels incredible stress when criticized for failing to provide or care about his partner (thus invoking the fight or flight instinct) and the other feels sharply attuned to her partner's lack of relating or lack of sharing about vulnerabilities, feeling isolated in the process. When a woman says, "We need to talk," it may mean "Help me relieve my stress by talking to me." For the man, it sounds like she's saying "I need to complain," and he's out of there!

3. Brain Scan

Male brain? Female brain? Aren't all brains alike? Yes and no.

For the most part, our brains have a lot of similar functions. However, male and female brains have different structures, which makes a big difference. Male brain structures tend toward specialized tasks and have lots of loosely integrated compartments. The good news: this leads to men's ability to focus like a laser beam on whatever they do, whether performing a work task, playing a video game, or watching sports. The bad news: it's really hard to break that laser beam to get them to pay attention to you!

Women have more integrated brains where the compartments connect to each other nicely. This allows women to "multi-task" such as listening to their friend on the phone and performing household tasks and planning the next vacation and ..., all at the same time. Distractions? No problem.

Imagine two people living together where one can very easily do several things at once and the other performs at his best when doing one thing at a time. Now imagine the multi-tasker expecting the one-thing-at-a-time person to talk to her at the same time he is watching the last game of the finals. By the way, if you don't know what that means, then chalk it up to yet another difference between men and women.

4. Going Hormonal

Uh-oh! Now we're going to talk about that nasty testosterone that makes all men horny and have a one-track mind. Well, almost.

Men's bodies do have a lot of the hormone called testosterone floating around in their blood streams. This chemical causes men to have a tendency toward action and doing, rather than relating. This includes sexual action, but does not represent the whole story. Testosterone-based humans (men) often tend to show "love" through actions and trying to solve problems for others, not necessarily by doing things that express attention to a relationship like a woman might do.

Women, on the other hand, are filled with a hormone called oxytocin, sometimes called the hormone of "love and cuddle." It floods a woman's body during the childbirth process, for obvious reasons. It also causes women to approach relationships and love in very different ways than men do.

Imagine two people living together where one expresses love by mowing the lawn or hanging a lighting fixture and the other expresses love by talking and hugging. What expectations would they have of each other? What could go wrong there?

5. Now, Don't Get All Emotional

Let me be clear, it is a myth that men cannot feel emotions. Men and women have very similar equipment in their brains (more or less) for feeling emotions. Actually, men can feel a lot of emotion at times, such that they become "flooded" with emotion, making them go into fight or flight mode. So, why don't they express emotions like women do?

First, men's brains do not have as many connections between the emotion processing and the language processing parts. So, men cannot (and I do mean **cannot**) express their emotions as competently as women, who have many emotion-language connections in their brains. Further, recall men's fear of not being able to perform? Why would a man try doing something he literally cannot do? Oh, the shame!

Second, and more importantly, men have a "code" against expressing emotions (or acting in **any** way feminine or womanly, for that matter). Big boys don't cry. Suck it up. Man up. Walk it off. And so on. Men hear these helpful phrases throughout their lives. Shame on a man who goes against the code.

Imagine two people living together where one cannot and is not supposed to express emotions and the other considers expressing emotions as a natural, normal part of any good relationship. Can you feel the fear of failure (men) and the fear of isolation (women) beginning to form?

6. I Don't Want to Talk About It

Taking up where the last point left off, men **do** talk, but in a very different way from women. Try getting a man to talk about something he's good at, something he knows a lot about (or thinks he does), or a problem he can solve and you can't shut him up. Try getting him to talk about his emotions, his feelings, his vulnerabilities, and you can't get him to say anything. Remember that both nature (brain structure) and nurture (the male code) govern his ability and desire to talk. He excels at the first kind of talking and fails miserably at the second kind.

Women, on the other hand, have both the nature and nurture that orients them toward talking, since that is their way of managing stress. Women's brains have many more language-oriented parts and they connect together nicely. Further, women gain connection and validation by exposing their vulnerabilities ("I feel bad." "Oh, I feel bad too.").

Imagine two people living together where one excels in solving problems and talking about specialized topics and does not do well at exposing vulnerabilities. The other excels at talking about emotions and vulnerabilities. What expectations would they have of each other? What could go wrong there?

7. Shop 'til You Drop

OK, in general it seems that women like to shop and men don't. This does not always prove true, but let's take a closer look at the differences between men and women when they do shop.

Women tend to have a long list of criteria for whatever they set out to buy. Further, they need to meet most or all of those criteria before they buy. Men typically have a very short list of criteria and don't need to meet all of them before buying. They seem satisfied with whatever they find first and don't often spend a lot of time shopping.

Imagine two people living together where one spends a lot of time and effort in making selections (about shoes, dish soap, or boyfriends) and the other does not spend much time and seems easily satisfied. Would shopping be a pleasant activity for them to enjoy together? On another level, how did they come together and what can we imagine might their future together be like? I don't know the answer to the last question, but it strikes me as interesting to think about this.

8. Finding Myself

While less and less true as time goes on, men still tend to gain and keep their identities based on what they do for a living, where women tend to base their identities on their relationships. The loss of a job can devastate a man because he loses his identity, not to mention he fails at being a provider (see above). Loss of a job can also devastate a woman, but for different reasons, including fear of deprivation (also see above) or loss of relationships. Loss of a relationship may devastate a woman, but not really bother a man too much since relationships don't carry as much weight with men.

9. Down There

People's thinking about differences between men and women tend to gravitate toward this area. It seems so obvious, what with innies, outies, testosterone, and all. But a serious look at sex reveals some important differences that can make or break a relationship. Let me provide a sampling.

We've already talked about testosterone (action) vs. oxytocin (love and cuddle). These explain themselves. Let me add that men have testosterone levels 10 to 20 times that of women. Men's sex drive resembles a microwave oven: quick on, quick off, quick result. Women resemble electric ovens: needing time to warm up, to cool down, and to get a result. Stress and anger turn women off. For men, sex dampens stress, helping them manage it, and anger is, at worst, not an issue, and at best, a turn-on. Men just need a place for sex, where women often need a reason. For men, sex represents an end in itself. For women, it is often a means to an end (romantic, deepening a relationship, etc.).

A man can turn a woman on by doing some or all of the following: caress, praise, pamper, relish, savor, massage, fix things, empathize, serenade, compliment, support, soothe, tantalize, humor, console, protect, excite, forgive, charm, attend to, trust, defend, spoil, dream of, indulge, worship, listen to, respond to, entertain, cuddle, ignore fat or wrinkles, embrace, acknowledge, hug, etc., etc.

A woman can turn a man on by: showing up naked!

10. When Things Go Bad

When problems arise in a relationship, both men and women feel significant stress. But, each handles that stress in a different way, either using fight or flight (men) or tend and befriend (women). When things get really bad, men and women also take a different approach. Women initiate 72% of all divorces. They agonize over the decision and may take years, but once they've decided, it's done, the woman detaches and doesn't go back. This tends to follow some kind of crisis where the man withdraws from her due to feeling inadequate and gives her space (as he would want).

Men, who you may recall have a different way of "shopping," sometimes have their eye on another woman and can be impulsive about leaving. However, often men just seem to put up with relationship problems and don't reveal their dissatisfaction. That would be admitting failure. This type of man winds up in my office, dragged in by his wife. He makes no complaints about their relationship while listening to a litany of complaints from his wife, and wonders what's gone wrong, acting authentically clueless. Often, what's gone wrong involves one or more of the differences listed here and neither he nor she can understand the other.

So, Now What?

By now, you should have a much better idea of the ways men and women differ and that these differences can significantly affect your attitude toward your partner. Some of these things cannot change, especially the ones involving brain structure or hormones. I recommend you take an attitude of tolerance toward these, or think long and hard about whether these things represent a “make or break” situation for you.

The other things, such as those involving “codes” or social conditioning, **can** change with some effort and willingness. You can address any or all of these differences in couples counseling or individual therapy with someone knowledgeable about the differences.

Warning: I advise backing away from any therapist or counselor who has an axe to grind regarding sex differences.

I confess!

I have an axe to grind!

This article is aimed at women who don't understand why men do the things they do (or don't do what you want them to do). Yes, I have an agenda. Being a male and a psychologist, I want to educate you so that you can help decrease both your suffering and his by taking an attitude of tolerance and understanding toward him.

Before you say it, this information is **not** an excuse for men's laziness or lack of trying or caring. It is real and factual. It is offered in the spirit of getting to know your partner better and understanding what can and cannot be changed.

Good luck and let me know if I can help. I promise I'll leave my axe behind.

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[How to Improve Your Marriage Without Talking About It](#)
by Patricia Love and Steven Stosny

[The Female Brain](#)
by Louann Brizendine

[Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps:](#)
[How We're Different and What To Do About It](#)
by Allan Pease & Barbara Pease

[You Just Don't Understand:](#)
[Women and Men in Conversation](#)
by Deborah Tannen