

## Relationship Talking Points: Speak Your Spouse's Language

Elizabeth Bernstein

A new study confirms the male and female brains are wired differently. So how will the sexes ever actually understand each other? Elizabeth Bernstein discusses on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

Anna and Mike Peterson recently had dinner at their favorite steakhouse, came home, checked on their teenagers watching TV in the basement and then retired to their bedroom—where Ms. Peterson lit a candle "to create an intimate atmosphere."

The next morning, Mr. Peterson left early for work. When his wife woke up, she texted him: "Good morning, my love. How are you today? I had a wonderful night with you. I hope we can find time for that more often."

Mr. Peterson responded immediately with exactly one word: "Busy."

Do men and women speak the same language?



### Tips for Better Communication

There are concrete strategies, therapists and scientists say, that can increase understanding.

#### FOR MEN

When you are listening ...

- Don't think about what you are going to say next while the other person is talking.
- Ask follow-up questions. This demonstrates that you care.
- Consider how the other person wants you to respond.

When you are speaking ...

- Don't give advice until asked.
- Try to identify some of your emotions and take a chance: Express them!

**FOR WOMEN**

When you are listening ...

- Don't get upset if the other person seems curt, especially in email or text. This can be simply a matter of style.
- Draw someone out with empathic guesses. 'I imagine you were frustrated.'
- Be calm, so the other person feels it is safe to share emotions.

When you are speaking ...

- Edit your story. Pare down emotion and give only essential details. Perhaps prepare bullet points.
- Tell him how you want him to respond. 'More than advice, I need you to just listen.'

'Honey, Now I Get What You Mean'

- Create a buffer zone. Take a few minutes to prepare yourself before an emotional conversation. Sit quietly in the car or walk around the block. Don't walk in the door after work and immediately raise the topic.
- Before beginning, ask if it's a good time to talk. Interrupting someone who is busy—especially a man—isn't the best way to get his or her full attention.
- Pause at times during the conversation. The other person needs time to process what you just said.
- Validate, validate, validate. "It's no wonder you are angry." "I can imagine how you must feel."

A University of Pennsylvania study of brain scans has reignited the controversy over what might explain the differences in the social behavior of men and women, and why they often have so much trouble communicating. The findings, published earlier this month in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, indicate that, starting in adolescence, brain wiring starts to differ in men and women. Brain scans of women showed more connections between the two hemispheres, left and right, compared with men of the same age, whose scans showed more connections within hemispheres.

Neuroscientists say the study lends visual support to an idea many have long believed—that women, in general, may be better wired for multitasking and analytical thought, which

**require coordination of activity in both hemispheres. Men may be better wired for focused linear tasks that require attention to one thing at a time.**

**Experts caution the conclusions are speculative, and these patterns show up only when a large number of people are studied.**

**Other research, though, holds the differences between men and women are a matter of degree, not of kind. There are no categorical differences between the sexes in areas such as sexual attitudes and behaviors, personality and social orientation (whether men are more aggressive or women more caring, for example), according to a re-analysis of 13 studies on the psychological characteristics of men and women published earlier this year in The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.**

**"Men and women are much more similar than they are fundamentally different," says Harry T. Reis, a researcher on the study and professor of psychology at the University of Rochester.**

**Yet men and women often express themselves in what can seem like predictably different ways. "Women put their emotional state into speech much faster," says Louann Brizendine, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of the books "The Female Brain" and "The Male Brain." "That can be overwhelming to men," she says.**

**Men and women both feel emotions deeply but process them at different speeds. And individuals vary. "From what we know of brain circuitry, 10% of each gender behaves more like the other gender," Dr. Brizendine says.**

**The research suggests men are more comfortable with linear thinking while women don't mind toggling between topics. They each gravitate to different issues. Women are often encouraged to attend to emotions from a young age, and they like to talk about relationships. Men typically don't like relationship talk as much. In both instances, nurture reinforces nature, Dr. Brizendine says.**

**If after an argument many women would say they remain upset longer than their husbands, it may be because estrogen enhances and prolongs the secretion of the stress hormone cortisol, which can stay elevated for up to 24 hours, according to Marianne Legato, a cardiologist and founder of the Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine at New York's Columbia University Medical Center. "This makes women keep obsessing, stay awake and stay anxious, long after he's forgotten the unpleasant incident," she says.**

**Ms. Peterson, author of the love text, says she was upset by her husband's one-word response. "I felt that he'd moved on," says Ms. Peterson, a 45-year-old licensed clinical social worker from Frederick, Md.**

Several days later, she told her husband, 58, that she was hurt and asked if he had enjoyed the evening. "He confirmed with a deeply toned 'Yes,' " she says. "I recognized that he was content and ready for the next leg of the conversation."

Mr. Peterson, a structural welder for a railroad, says his text was brief because he was at work and it can be dangerous to use a cellphone near the tracks. "I wanted her to understand that I did get her message and was responding to her," he says.

In 18 years of marriage, the Petersons have worked to understand each other's communication style. Ms. Peterson accepts that her husband doesn't talk about feelings or reminisce much. She doesn't try to engage him in long emotional, nostalgic conversations, and calls a girlfriend or writes in her journal instead.

When she does want to share something with him, Ms. Peterson tells him all he needs to do is listen. "That validates his process and mine," she says. Mr. Peterson says he gives his wife a "thumbs up" for adjusting how she relates to him.

**How can you communicate better with the opposite sex?**

Therapists say before speaking, both men and women should take a breath to collect their thoughts. Think through what you want to say and remind yourself to listen.

It may be helpful for men to explain that they want to be accepted even if they don't often share emotions. But be aware: Sharing emotions often helps a relationship.

Carolyn Daitch, a Farmington Hills, Mich., psychologist and author of "Anxious in Love," says men often experience emotions physically, and to help them understand their emotions she often advises them to take cues from their bodies.

Is your heart pounding? "Then take a risk and try to express it," Dr. Daitch says. Women, for their part, can let men know that they will not judge or reject them for their feelings. "Try to speak the language of the other person," Dr. Daitch advises.

Women, especially, should be strategic about timing. "Men process one thing at a time," says Dr. Legato. "It's dumb to approach a man when he's tinkering with his car, reading a law brief or watching the game."

Women also should edit themselves. Several years ago, I read in Dr. Legato's book "Why Men Never Remember and Women Never Forget" that women process more language each day than men. Ever since I have been making my emails and texts to men shorter and more concise—and I have noticed I get quicker and more enthusiastic replies.

Yet women do sometimes need to spell out what they need from a man in the way of verbal communication. Dr. Brizendine, who is married to a neuroscientist, attached a yellow sticky note to her husband's home computer with a reminder that reads, "Honey, I know how you feel."