

How to Decipher the Gender Code

It was early in our marriage. I don't remember the specifics, only that there was a major communication breakdown.

We were both talking in perfectly coherent speech. But we obviously were not speaking the same language. And it wasn't the first time. Finally, it dawned on me what was going on.

I had married an alien.

There really was no other explanation possible. There was some kind of language barrier going on. Like, one of us was a native English speaker, and the other learned the language later—maybe at the Greater Intergalactic Royal Language School (GIRLS).

Sound familiar? Communication is one of the major issues couples struggle with. These communication breakdowns illustrate a larger, and more obvious, point: We're different. And while this can create difficulties at times, in the long run our differences actually make our lives work better than if we were all the same.

Eve Got the Raw End of the Deal

If we go back to the creation accounts in Genesis, we can see that these differences were intentional on God's part. In Genesis 2:18 we read, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (NIV).

The word translated as *suitable* here might better be translated as *corresponding*. In other words, God didn't say the man needed a helper to meet his needs—that's why none of the animals were "suitable." Rather, the man needed someone

who could work with him, to fill in the gaps, so to speak. By definition, then, this person would be different from the man. And along came Eve.

Eventually, they sinned. Eve's initial sin was to believe the word of the serpent over God's own words. Adam's initial sin was one of inaction: He stood there and watched while the serpent deceived his wife.

Not to go off on a tangent here, but hey, guys! If a serpent is tricking your wife into sinning against God, you shouldn't stand there and watch. You should pick up a stick and kill the serpent!

Adam and Eve compounded their sin by hiding from God, and then Adam actually blamed God and Eve for his sin: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree" (Gen. 3:12).

Nice one, Adam.

And then came the curse. Actually, curses. And here is where Eve got the raw end of the deal.

For women, the curse of pain in childbearing is not the worst part. The rest of Genesis 3:16 says, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." That's a terrible curse! Man's curse is that it will be a lot harder for our work to be productive (vv. 17-19).

So the woman's curse was relational, and the man's curse was task-oriented. And this summarizes a major difference between the average woman and man—and explains much of the sin and frustration in the world.

A woman is wired for relationship—"a helper"—and this was corrupted by sin. For instance, women often ache for marriage and won't leave an abusive relationship for fear of being alone.

A man is wired for task—God “put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15)—and this also was corrupted by sin. Thus, men tend to gravitate toward workaholism or laziness. Those are two extremes of the same taint on our view of work.

In both cases, something is taking the place of God in our worldview—either relationships or work becomes an idol.

Uniquely Wired

Modern psychology has come to the same conclusion. In a study he wrote about in his book *Sixteen Men*, psychologist Dr. Loren Pedersen found that, contrary to academic opinion that all gender differences are cultural, there are actually a set of traits that are very different in the majority of men and women.

He found that about two-thirds of men tend toward “thinking,” and two-thirds of women tend toward “feeling” when giving a Myers-Briggs personality inventory. This gives us insight into how women and men view and react to the world differently. These are generalizations, of course. But they ring true for the vast proportion of my own experiences and for most men (and women) I have talked to.

Since men tend toward “thinking,” it makes us more oriented toward problem-solving. We also are more willing to take on challenges, often because we feel like we have assessed the “risk-reward” equation to our satisfaction. The ramifications of this are that we often want to “fix” everything. We can also be arrogant and even unsafe.

Since women tend toward the “feeling” side, it makes them more sensitive to a person’s emotions, seeking connection and intimacy. This can make men uncomfortable.

Using Pedersen’s study, Geoff Gorsuch with the Navigators created a set of rules that help to generally describe how men

and women see the world. Look at the comparison below to see the ramifications—both positive and negative—of each approach.

1. Most men tend to seek emotional space, while most women tend to seek emotional intimacy.

Men

- Positive: Helps men to obtain objectivity.
- Negative: Might make a man seem cold or uncomfortable with emotional expression.

Women

- Positive: Allows women to step into each other's lives easily and develop relationships quickly.
- Negative: Can sometimes ignore the facts of a situation based on emotional needs subject to manipulation.

2. Most men tend to see challenges while most women seek security or safety.

Men

- Positive: Gets things done. Willing to take risks.
- Negative: Can be very short-sighted. Can lead to excessive risk-taking and dangerous behavior.

Women

- Positive: Can help avoid unnecessary risks. Takes the long-term view.
- Can get "stuck," not realizing their potential (or keeping their mate from realizing his).

3. Most men tend to "fix" rather than "accept."

Men

- Positive: Focus on problem-solving. If no one wanted to fix anything, everything would stay broken.

- Negative: Can look at everything as a problem to be solved, rather than an experience to learn from.

Women

- Positive: Better suited for walking through things with people, rather than fixing them.
- Negative: Can focus on the emotional at the expense of dealing with issues decisively.

4. Most men tend to process information linearly, while women process in a more integrated fashion.

Men

- Positive: Methodical approach. Don't get confused by unrelated information or details.
- Negative: Everything is "either/or." Can't see the forest for the trees.

Women

- Positive: Better able to see the big picture. Allows for the "both/and."
- Negative: Trying to do too much at once. Multitasking can lead to mediocrity or feeling overwhelmed.

5. Most men tend to experience frustration as explosive anger while women experience frustration through a variety of emotional escalations.

Men

- Positive: Will tolerate a lot of minor frustrations if the task is getting done.
- Negative: Explosive anger is never good. Might have been able to head off the frustration if expressed earlier.

Women

- Positive: Venting as you go can help release pressure.

- Negative: Can come across as nagging.

Embrace the Differences

The attributes and tendencies of men are often used—on TV, in movies, even in sermon illustrations—for comic relief. We are portrayed as emotionally clueless buffoons.

The important thing to remember about these differences is that they do not give either gender an advantage over the other. Going back to the word in Genesis, they are *corresponding*. We fit together like pieces of a puzzle. My strengths match up to my wife's areas of need, and her strengths match up with my areas of need. They help us in our parenting, managing our household, involvement in church and our friendships.

Here are some tips for inter-species—oops, I mean inter-gender—communication. You can share these with your wife as well:

- **Sharing problems.** When a guy shares a problem, 99 percent of the time it means he is looking for a solution. When a woman shares a problem—particularly with her husband—it usually means she wants to share the problem—share as in bearing one another's burdens. This became clear to me one day when my wife had shared a problem with me. I was about three sentences into telling her how to solve it when she said, "I'm not stupid. I know what to do. That's not why I told you. I just needed to talk with you about it." She was sharing with me (relationship), not looking for me to tell her what to do (task).
- **Don't fear the tears.** Don't be manipulated by them either. Guys express emotions in two ways: silence and explosion. Women escalate in phases. Just because she's crying doesn't mean she's desperate. When your wife cries, more often than not she just needs you to connect

with her emotionally. Hug her, tell her you're sorry she's sad, tell her you love her and that God does too. But don't freak out. (And if you're showing this to your wife, this is just for her: Ladies, don't take advantage of your husband's discomfort with tears by using them to get what you want. It's fighting dirty. And it's actually undermining your intimacy. When he figures it out, he will be hurt and he will withdraw from you emotionally.)

- **Listen responsively.** Our wives need to be acknowledged. To you, your silence when she talks to you means, "I heard you. I get it. I don't have any questions." To her, it means, "I'm not really listening to you." Whether she's sharing a problem or asking you to take out the garbage, acknowledge what she's saying.
- **Sex.** For a guy, sex goes great on the to-do list. We're usually happy to accomplish this task whenever asked! For a woman, sex is a celebration of the relationship. It is the culmination of a series of events and feelings that make her want to be close to you. Be careful about the language you use when talking about sex. Don't expect to come in at the end of a hard day, say two words to her during dinner, watch ESPN while she does the dishes, kiss the kids on the forehead before she puts them to bed and then find your wife to be in the mood for intimacy with you.
- **Pray.** Pray for your wife, and pray with your wife. When you don't feel like much of a spiritual leader, it's tough to feel like she will even want to pray with you. But she does. Give your wife a hug before you leave in the morning and say, "Can I pray for us real quick?" Then ask God to protect your wife, to be with her throughout the day and for Him to help you be the best husband you can be. This will change your heart and hers.

Take Heart!

We did a workshop on this topic at FUEL 2013. Most of the attendees were wives. I was explaining to them the perspective their husbands have and how different it is from their own. I found myself somewhat apologetic for men and our focus on task over relationship.

But then one of the wives said something profound: "Don't apologize for how men are! My husband is just like you described, and I like it! We need someone in our marriage who can put the emotions aside and make a tough decision. I need someone who will push me to take risks. It's good for me that he focuses on things one at a time while I'm trying to do five things at once and feeling overwhelmed. God made us this way for a reason. I'll take the negatives, because the positives are so great." Wise words.

So take heart! God made you the way you are. And He made the women in our lives the way they are as well. If you'll pay attention and realize the motivations of a woman's heart, you will (usually) be able to decipher the gender code.

Brett Clemmer is a Christ-follower, husband, father, rock-climber, runner and avid reader. He lives in Central Florida and works for Man in the Mirror. In his role as vice president of leadership development, Brett spends the majority of his time writing, training and equipping church leaders to disciple men. Brett co-authored No Man Left Behind, a guidebook for church leaders who want to build male disciples in their church. He is active on Facebook and Twitter and maintains the One Man, Under God blog at .