



"Honey, I'll be right in to talk as soon as I put my football gear on."

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At the risk of offending my reading audience the title of this article drips with sarcasm to drive home a point. It's probably no surprise to any of you men that as a group we have been reluctantly dragged by the tide of reformist movements that have revamped gender roles. Notwithstanding our denials we have shed traditional socialization patterns as easily as one sheds a piece of gum on the soles of one's shoes without using our hands. This means that "The king of the castle mentality" still lives especially among generations sandwiching The Baby Boomers. If the shoe fits then you can picture in your minds' eyes Ward Cleaver lounging at home in his cardigan sweater while June Cleaver does all the housework. I don't think there has ever been much debate over men's inflated sense of entitlement being linked to their status as breadwinners of their families. Men continue to derive self-worth from "doing for" as opposed to "being with" others. We may find this to be the case even in households where we find the men caring for their children while their wives ply their trades in corporate America.

Maybe, it's hard for some of us men to accept that we can be stuck in emotional time warps especially if we cringe at the thought that we are repeating behaviors in our partnerships we swore we would not repeat after giving our parents failing grades in the course: Marital & Parental Relations 101. Still, even as we men acknowledge that gender roles have become fluid, reversible and interchangeable especially, when kids are factored into the equation, I still hear women clients complain that they wish their husbands didn't sit with them and feel compelled to fix their problems as if they were automobiles with faulty carburetors. These gender role challenges are not the exclusive province of heterosexual relationships either and apply as well in gay and lesbian relationships. Sex may be less significant than which parent are you most comfortable identifying with.

Given this emotional backdrop men may hear something very different when they listen to their partners. Expressions like: "Honey you're never around" or "I need you to divorce your tailgating buddies and remember who you married," are usually ill conceived

communications to their partners designed to convey that these women want to spend more time with their guys, need to feel more connected, and more important to them. Unfortunately, when you couple the male ego's insecurities with performance standards that eye Donald Trump as the standard bearer of success, such remarks do not go over very well. They are often heard as: "Buddy, you're not doing enough and therefore, you are not only to blame for any unhappiness I feel but, more over you are an incompetent partner because you are an inadequate person."

Its not hard to guess that most men at this point would not turn to their partners and endearingly reply: "Honey, I heard you just say that I am a loser. Will you please clarify your last remarks for me?" Criticisms, justified or not, may cause emotional abrasions that don't hurt that much and don't bleed for long but, negative judgments can feel like stab wounds in the chest. This is much more the case if we guys at the receiving end feel clueless as to what it is that will make our partners happy. This is especially so when what we experience to be attacks on our worth as partners are confirmations of our own worst fears.

My experience counseling couples is that women who are heard by their men attacking them where they are most likely to see stars are often retaliating for what they experience as being attacks on their adequacy as nurturers and attractive women. In truth, guys if the loves of your lives are indeed railing at you it may be their way of saying: "I love you and need your loving support, why are you rejecting me by taking me for granted or ignoring me." At this point couples can achieve an impasse where two wrongs make a right and the circular battles that ensue make it easy for each partner to say: "You started!" They remain with their horns locked because they feel stuck in such flawed polarized thinking as: "One of us is crazy and its not me," and "You're the one that needs to change because you're the one that needs fixing. I'm fine just the way I am." Also, its simply safer to find justifications to lock horns at a distance than risk being gored. If we fear for our emotional lives then, it stands to reason that we will avoid being in the same room unless, we are distracted by television, kids and other folks or engrossing tasks. If you find yourself or your partner cleaning out the garage at 11PM on a Saturday night it is a telltale sign that at least one partner feels as safe in the bedroom as driving a car on black ice. Guys are particularly susceptible to running away from potential conflicts as they tend to equate emotional vulnerability with weakness and having emotional needs as signs of childish and shameful dependency.

The beginning of a new lease on a couples life may start with the individual realization that one's emotions are one's emotions and that losing control of them so that they become weapons leaves that partner feeling bad about himself no matter how much immediate satisfaction is derived from exacting revenge. In the self-esteem game, a game of skill that is built on learning how to regulate our own self esteem, two wrongs never make a right. Therefore, if we violate the values upon which we esteem ourselves then, we pay dearly. Adults don't feel good about themselves when they behave like children. It's a fact of life. Affirming our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness regardless of our limitations and deficiencies gives us a most crucial one degree of separation and protection from what is thrown at us from our wounded partners. Keep in mind, if we weren't so important to our partners he or she wouldn't be screaming about what they want that they're not getting from us.

Guys will take off their emotional football gear if they have a better handle on warding off dreaded responses to "what they did or said that was wrong?" Someone must be willing to take the lead in changing destructive patterns of relating and the partner better equipped to do so will often volunteer if life at home is to improve. "Who started it all?" can't be all that important if your top priority is to have a mutually satisfying relationship.

If you're taking the lead here are a few tips to increase the safety and security of the climate in the room so that a constructive dialogue for working out differences may ensue:

- 1) Success is founded on paving roads that are clearly marked and paved so as to be negotiable. Ask your partner for what you want. Complaints are just thinly veiled wishes and seldom received in a spirit of cooperation,
- 2) Make sure that your facial expressions, body language and tone of voice are congruent with your message. Often, a hostile or impatient tone of voice or angry facial expression will drown out a respectful request. It will leave the recipient both confused, annoyed and distrustful so as to promote efforts to "figure you out" instead of relating to you and asking questions about what is confusing him.

3) You may be communicating respectfully and considerately and still be misinterpreted. Find out what was heard and straighten out any mistaken interpretations before they take on lives of their own.

4) Give feedback that establishes how you are hearing and reacting to your partners remarks so that if your partners leave a little bit to be desired in the empathy department you can teach them about the cause-effect relationships that influence your regard for them. For example, "Honey, when you pick up the newspaper as I tell you about the horrible day I had I feel you don't care about me outside of what you want from me. I feel rejected by you. I feel hurt, angry and rageful and feel like treating you like you treat me; like you don't exist."

5) Model respectful and considerate communications. Avoid anything that might be construed as an effort to use guilt and shame as tools of manipulation and control. No one wants to be anyone else's pawn. Finally,

6) Scrupulously avoid self-righteousness; anything that might be interpreted as an ivory tower sermon. Leave the trained observations to folks like myself. We get paid to deliver sugar coated pills.

Practice new ways of being with each other, learn from your mistakes, be patient with each other and enjoy the fruits of your labors of love.