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He says, she says: Communication between the sexes can be difficult

By Aimee Heckel (Contact) Friday, February 9, 2007

She says

Say what you want. Set your partner up for success, not a botched mind-reading game. Speak up. Soft-spoken women have a disadvantage when trying to persuade or negotiate. Try talking to a man side-by-side instead of face-to-face sometimes. Don't coil up. Assume a more relaxed position and create more "territory." Don't smile too much, especially if it might diminish your credibility. Be careful not to overdo your gestures. Make sure they match your verbal messages. Cut to the chase. A long story might not always be the most effective. Curb meaningless chatter, especially in business situations. Women can listen too

She wants flowers for Valentine's Day. A bouquet of wildflowers. Purple ones. But she doesn't tell him.

After all, if she told him, that would ruin the surprise. Plus, it might mean he just got her flowers because she asked him to — not because he wanted to out of the deep, loving reservoir of his heart.

And if she told him that, then he might only get her flowers because he's afraid that she's afraid that he was only getting her flowers because she asked.

Or something.

So she doesn't ask. She doesn't get flowers. And she's crushed. Seriously, what kind of guy can't magically read

He says

Make conscious attempts to engage in eye contact. This sends the message, "You are important." Try talking to a woman face-to-face instead of side-by-side. Use noises, such as "uh huh," to show you're listening. Eliminate barriers, such as newspapers and crossed arms. Pay attention to nonverbal cues to detect emotions. Remember that women initiate conversations to bond. Listen empathetically. You don't have to agree to identify to explese stablish diataning Don't haundaries sary hurding iserson out tespected diagrammakes "bagree" to acmenabut Arunderstandditora wareeno fiinteding terbiraise out Be woices bighthward mark relationave contects stores formance or anythere haenda coenthe table, fotoerno hasisal Souscenait Yaby Doon't SayauNavrigating block espate benchronication in the cure. thed Survey le byold undrey Nelson.

minds? Her boyfriend obviously doesn't love her.

As for him, he thinks everything's cool. He doesn't notice the edge in her voice and the 25,000 nonverbal cues screaming disappointment. And he never stopped to consider why his woman had been talking for a week straight about how a bouquet of purple flowers would really "bring out the details" in the toss pillows. Whatever.

The scenario might sound ridiculous if it weren't played out regularly in relationships between men and women, according to Audrey Nelson, a Boulder specialist in gender communication.

Nelson, the author of "You Don't Say: Navigating Nonverbal Communication Between the Sexes," holds workshops on improving communication. She teaches what she calls "gender-flexing." That is, understanding the different ways men and women communicate and tweaking your own strategies to meet your partner on their playing field.

Nelson was a student at the first women's studies department in the nation, at San Diego State University in California. Back then, at the birth of the women's right movement, some people believed there were no differences between genders, and distinguishing could be detrimental to women's equal treatment.

But 30 years of research later, Nelson says there are indisputable differences — whether learned or genetic. And not getting that leads to communication break-downs, which fuel divorce and conflict, she says.

Here's Nelson's take.

Generally, men communicate directly. You know what he wants, but he might come off insensitive, uncaring or harsh. He is goal-oriented. He takes words literally. If you say nothing is wrong, he hears, "Nothing is wrong."

As for women, content is important, but so are feelings. Women notice nonverbal cues easier. They are process-oriented, appreciating the story and details, and even tangents that can dilute the point of the conversation. Communication is an aspect of bonding and connection.

Think: It's easy to hurt a woman by ostracizing her. Men can work side-by-side with their enemies. They don't want to be everyone's best friend.

"It's not bad or good," Nelson says. "It's a different culture."

For instance, when an American goes to Italy, she says, here are different cultural norms. It's not that one country's behavior is superior, but if you understand and adopt the other norms, you can get along easier.

When women (and men) say that men don't listen, they are wrong, Nelson says. Men listen differently.

Which leads to the most common pressure around Valentine's Day. Most likely, the woman has expectations, but she sets him up for failure by not telling him.

And men often struggle to express intimacy, falling back on what experts joke is one of the ten commandments of masculinity: "Thou shall not be vulnerable."

She suggests to men that they not only listen to what their partner says she wants, but also add a few unsolicited displays of affection, to maintain the surprise.

Nelson suggests to women that they say what they expect. Simply.

That's what Ginny Landes does. And as it turns out, Landes, 56, of Boulder, doesn't like Valentine's Day. She doesn't want to celebrate it, so she told her boyfriend.

But her birthday is coming up Feb. 24. And she expects something special then.

As for what her boyfriend expects on Valentine's Day? Landes laughs, because she forgot to ask him. She'll ask tonight, she says.

"Communicating is always a challenge. It's work," Landes says. "But it's good work."

Pam Hergett, 43, says she has been consciously expressing her needs for 16 years, since she was a newlywed and she first attended one of Nelson's gender communication classes.

This Valentine's Day, she says she no longer needs to say what she wants, because her husband knows. She says her husband will give her flowers. They will celebrate with their children. She'll send flowers to his office, too.

"I never expect him to read my mind," she says, adding that she's no expert. "We just don't play any

f those games."	
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