

# Gender Perspectives in Marriage: Creating Security by Reducing Shame and Fear

## Part 1: A Sense of Security

Have you heard the joke about the exasperated husband who says to his wife in the midst of a quarrel, "Why are you so beautiful and yet so stupid?" His wife, maintaining her composure, ponders for a moment then replies. "I am so beautiful so you will find me attractive and I am so stupid so I will find you attractive."

Perspective: it can make a big difference in how we think, feel, behave and relate to the opposite sex. Substantial psychological research on gender differences has shown that men and women differ significantly in how they perceive, think and communicate. According to communication researcher Deborah Tannen, men tend to approach the world from the point of gaining status, preserving independence and avoiding failure. Women tend to approach the world as a network of connections and try to preserve community, intimacy and avoid isolation. (Tannen, 1990) These generalizations obviously do not apply to each and every man or woman and there are lots of exceptions. However, it is useful to remember this difference in the context of everyday misunderstandings between men and women, husbands and wives.

Views about marriage differ by gender. Surveys suggest that in general, men tend to see relationship and marriage as a place to relax and feel they can recharge when stressed or tired. Since the world is seen by men as a place to gain status avoid failure (an independence focus), home needs to be the opposite for men. Ideally a man can kick back, feel unchallenged, not do anything he doesn't want to do. Often he engages in an *independent* activity like reading the newspaper, watching TV, puttering around the house fixing things. It could be an activity together with his spouse like renovating, going for a walk, skiing together. What makes home relaxing is the activity itself and the comfort of knowing that his partner is nearby. A sense of security in a relationship for men seems to be greatest when he is in activity and she is nearby.

Women also want to feel secure enough to relax in their relationship according to these surveys. Talking seems to help women relax (preserve community and avoid isolation). For most women, security in marriage comes from the interactions with men. They want to feel emotionally connected in order to relax and do this by expressing themselves and

listening to their spouse. Of course women like activity and men like communicating, but the degree that each wants it varies. So while both men and women want a sense of security from their relationship, that security comes in slightly different ways and feels different for each of them.

Here is how this subtle difference can become a problem. A man thinks he is honouring the relationship because he is relaxing with activity at home with her. On the other hand, she thinks he is failing to honour it because he is silent, not interacting and having a conversation with her. This subtle gender difference can lead to significant relationship problems.

In their book, *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking About It*, authors Patricia Love and Steven Stosny claim that talking about your relationship will not bring you together. These authors contend that less emphasis should be put on communication and more connection. They outline how connecting for men is through activity nearby or with their partner and for women it is talking, listening and interacting with their partner.

### **Tips For Men: Protect and Connect through Your Actions.**

Many men feel more emotionally connected to their partner when they can protect her. Throughout history a man's protection instinct meant keeping a woman from harm and severe deprivation through his actions. Nowadays, protection means caring about her emotional well-being. This requires listening but perhaps more importantly demonstrating protection and care by doing something for her without making her feeling incompetent.

1. When a woman complains, consider it a request for comfort or protection – not “to the rescue” or “fix it” as you may have done during dating but show you care, “convey admiration, empower her, assist and/or accompany her.” Help her out with the kids, the cooking, a problem at work she is worried about.... whatever!
2. If she nags or is resentful or too busy to bother with you, she is probably anxious about something. Don't make it worse by being defensive by withdrawing or criticizing. Don't just stand there, do something! Connect by demonstrating through your actions that you care and reduce her fear. Take a load of worry off her by doing something she needs to have done tangibly (the laundry) or intangibly (a compliment about a difficult decision she made).

3. Always help your wife feel secure and safe and emotionally connected to you. Never dismiss, or ridicule her fears. Affection will flow when anxiety or anger are not present.
4. To have a better sex life, and be a better lover, make a stronger emotional connection with her by cultivating a high level of compassion for her emotional state.

## **Tips For Women: Talk to Your Man so He Will Listen to You**

Many women feel more emotionally connected to their partner when they express their thoughts and feelings to him. Throughout history women relied more on other women for emotional support, creating home and community while their men went away to hunt, or to battle. Nowadays, with men at home more and in the absence of the immediate threats of harm and deprivation, women can connect through talking but may need to adapt their style so he will listen.

Here are some tips on how to talk to your man so he will listen to you.

1. Since men feel more relaxed when doing an activity, then some of the best times to have a conversation is while doing something together like going for a walk together. If he is already doing something on his own do not assume he is free to talk. Ask him: "Is now a good time to talk?" and if he says no then ask when.
2. Be brief and to the point. Most men are inattentive to long explanations that give a lot of detail and context. They may feel like you are rambling on then your main point is lost.
3. Do not talk to him as you would your girlfriends. Women have a more active emotional vocabulary than men. Most men, like Sergeant Friday of the 60's TV show Dragnet, prefer "The facts ma'am, just the facts."
4. Start softly and plan how you will introduce the issue. Research shows that a gentle, unemotional start will more likely engage your husband and help him stay open to any negative feelings you need to share.
5. State your complaints in the form of statements about how you feel about the situation not as criticisms of what he has done wrong. Do not shame him or make him feel inadequate.