



COUPLE TALK

Communicating with Your Partner

What Did You Mean?

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“Call me and let me know you’ve arrived safely.” Does this statement reflect love and concern, or does this statement demand control and oversight? Interestingly, both interpretations could be correct, and the interpretation you select may be influenced by your gender!

Some people believe that women and men are so different from one another that they come from different planets. It is important to remember, however, that we are more alike than different. Still, women and men have occasionally been found to interpret the same messages differently, and these differences in interpretation are often the causes of major conflicts.

Studies indicate that women, more frequently than men, emphasize the similarities between themselves and others, and try to make decisions that make everyone happy. They tend to be the relationship specialists and are typically the experts in “rapport talk,” which refers to the types of communication that build, maintain, and strengthen relationships. Women are more attentive to how much a person is liked or disliked, and how emotionally close or distant the other wants to be. Rapport talk reflects skills of talking, nurturing, emotional expression, empathy, and support.

Men, on the other hand, more frequently than women, emphasize the differences between themselves and others, and often make decisions based on their personal needs or desires. They tend to be the task accomplishment specialists and are typically the experts in “report talk,” which refers to the types of communication that analyzes issues and solves problems. Men are more attentive to issues of independence and competition. Report talk reflects skills of being competitive, lacking sentimentality, analyzing, and focusing aggressively on task accomplishment.

How are these differences seen in relationships? In the ways women and men communicate! Women, to a greater extent than men, are more sensitive to the “between the lines” information about intimacy embedded in messages they exchange with their mates. Men on the other hand, to a greater extent than women, are more sensitive to “between the lines meanings” about status. For example, when a woman says, “Let me know you arrived safely,” she probably feels that she’s demonstrating affection. But when her male counterpart hears, “Let me know you arrived safely,” he’s more likely to feel nagged, or that his competence is being challenged.

Understanding communication differences is the key to working them out. When we misunderstand one another, we often think that the other’s motives are not reasonable, mean spirited, or worse! But by knowing that women and men sometimes see — and hear! — things through different filters, we can begin to share with one another the distortions we experience, and thereby find our way to clarity. So, the next time you feel surprised, disappointed, or angry with someone’s response to something you’ve said, ask yourself if he or she may have misinterpreted your between the lines message.



ACTIVITY

Sit down with your spouse and make a list of how you would expect a wife to communicate with her husband. Should she be honest, tactful, direct, etc.? Next, list the ways you would want a husband to communicate with his wife. Now compare the two lists. Are the characteristics different? Similar? In what ways? You will probably find that the most desirable characteristics of communication are not very different for women and men.