

“Just the facts, ma’am” – Men and Women in Conversation

Dear Jennifer:

I completely agree that communication is a key factor in a healthy marriage. But, I think men and women talk differently to each other. So that a man’s idea of communication and a woman’s idea of communication are two entirely different things. Even if they both really want to communicate with each other it’s like their speaking two different languages. For example, my husband always wants to cut through, what he calls, “the chatter” and get to “the facts.” This makes me furious and I take it as an extreme putdown. What do you think?—A reader

Dear Reader:

I think that you are completely correct about men and women having entirely different styles of communication. Thus the huge proliferation of books about men and women coming from different planets. In some ways, we do. And, you and your husband are a pretty typical example of the conflicts that arise because of it.

In her book “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men In Conversation” Deborah Tannen summarizes the two gender styles like this: men prefer “report” talk and women prefer “rapport” talk.

This means that, in their communication, men are more interested in reporting and receiving the facts. How many men resonated with the line from the police drama Dragnet, i.e., Sargeant Joe Friday’s exhortation for “Just the facts, ma’am?” With the facts, men feel prepared to DO something about a situation – with “doing something” being their ultimate objective.

In their communication women are more concerned with establishing a rapport or relationship with the person that they’re talking with. That’s why we like conversations to go on and on. We feel close and connected through sharing words. There is no goal to DO anything except to enhance the relationship. The conversation is the end goal in itself.

Although both the report and rapport elements are always present in communication, men and women differ in what we focus on as important. It’s not a surprise that men and women remember conversations differently!

Research has also shown that men and women also differ in how we express ourselves emotionally. Women tend to be more open and to share more feelings of warmth,

happiness, joy, shame, guilt, fear, nervousness and sadness.
Men share more pride, disgust and contempt.

And, probably because women have more experience with caring for others, surveys show that they tend to feel that they give more emotional and empathic support than they receive in their key relationships.

You can see that the “simple” task of communication between men and women is multi-layered and complex. To learn more read about resolving these differences read Tannen’s classic book on the subject “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men In Conversation.”

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