

## **COLLIDING GENDER TRAITS**

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What typical male trait and typical female trait can collide to seriously strain a marriage? The answer may surprise you.

A couple sits in the marriage counselors office wondering where their 25 year old marriage went off course. Their thoughts run something like:

"He doesn't really care about me. If he did he wouldn't be so self-centered. He would be more loving and caring..."

"There's a boatload of women out there who'd be glad to be married to someone like me. Why isn't she more appreciative..."

The counselor is honing in on conflict resolution techniques and personality differences. Her unspoken assumption is that the husband needs to be a better communicator, and more emotionally engaged with his wife. It's not that the counseling hasn't been of value, but the counselor has failed to grasp a dynamic that will hinder significant progress in this marriage as long as it remains unaddressed.

The issue is that an important factor in the success of most marriages is the degree to which men and women are affirmed in their masculinity (i.e. "manhood") and femininity ("womanhood") within the marriage relationship. As men and women, the affirmation of our gender identities are vital to emotional health. And they are affirmed through a broad range of experiences which vary greatly according to individual or culture. For example, for men that might include excelling in sports or academics, success in the workplace, or engaging in (what culture considers to be) "manly" activities. For women, it could include fashion consciousness, satisfying friendships, or engaging in "womanly" activities. However, as a general rule, no context carries the potential for the affirmation of one's manhood or womanhood as much as courtship, marriage, and family life. And it is here that the differing natures of men and women can blend to create happy harmony or destructive dissonance.

(Part 2)

Marriage manuals point out the value women place on the expression of love received from their husbands, and the value men place on the respect and admiration they need from their wives. And there is no question that love and respect go a long way in filling the "cup" of gender affirmation. However, these are not the only parts of the equation. For many men express the sentiment, "I'm doing everything I know of to show her love, but it's never enough. It doesn't seem to count for anything." And how many women are heard to say, "My husband just doesn't understand me."?

Why do men use the phrase, "count for anything"? They're usually referring to the degree to which their wives are responsive and affectionate in general, and more specifically, the extent to which they are sexually responsive. In other words, oftentimes what they mean is, "No matter how hard I try to do the right things, my wife is still sexually unresponsive." And what usually is baffling to these men, is that many of them remember a time when their wives WERE sexually responsive. When these couples were dating, and for a time after marriage, both sides couldn't get enough physical intimacy. Even after children, although it was hard to find time or to be feeling rested, sex could still be frequent, and it could be good. But somewhere along the way things changed, and changed radically. That change is actually why the couple above is here for counseling. Ask her what has changed and she'll answer, "He just isn't as attentive as he used to be." Whereas he'll reply, "She acts like she doesn't even like me anymore." What is the nature of this change?

Part of the answer lies within the complicated interplay between the male sex drive, and that which seems to correspond to it in many married females (with children) - their "maternal instincts". Viewing from this perspective, let's try to unravel how this dramatic "change" took place in the marriage of this couple.

Chances are, their romance began with an exchange of "flirt signals". Flirting is a low intensity, low risk way of evoking gender-specific affirmation.

Regardless of what is actually said or done, John's signal communicates "Hey Baby, you're on my radar." And Mary's return signal says, "...And I'm liking it." She is thinking, "How exciting - he's paying attention to me!", while he's thinking, "She responded - now, I'm on first base!" And as the signals fly back and forth so does the affirmation. Soon, John is ready to take a larger risk by extending physical affection. When he holds her hand or puts his arm around her, and she snuggles into his arm, the affirmation intensifies.

Mary: "He likes me!"

John: "Second base and going strong!"

...and so it goes. Each risk John takes is met with a positive response, and both John and Mary are exhilarated by increased intimacy and the accompanying intensifying gender-specific affirmation. This progresses until with the marriage ceremony, sexual intercourse, the honeymoon, and settling in to live together, they've essentially taken the intensity as far as it can go. Then they resort to re-enacting what they've already experienced, expecting the same satisfying results. In a sense, up to this point, they each been putting their own "spin" on their shared experience. But this is the point where differing gender traits may begin to conflict, because John is seeking affirmation from Mary in the form of sexual responsiveness, while Mary is seeking affirmation from John in the form of emotional intimacy, now in increasingly non-sexual ways.

Now babies enter the equation. For Mary (assuming she wants a baby), the prospect of conception adds a new and exciting dimension to sexual intercourse. John was becoming anxious about Mary's increasing lack of sexual responsiveness, but that must have been something temporary because the former Mary is back, more responsive and passionate than ever. Sex has never been so good! But John is in for a huge let down, because what he is interpreting as her affirmation of him, is actually Mary's dormant "maternal instincts" beginning to awaken. John and Mary celebrate conception together, but things will never be the same. For from this point on, Mary is beginning to bond with the tiny life within - a bonding which will only intensify nine months later with the onset of nursing, and will continue to grow for the next decade. Meanwhile, without either John or Mary realizing it, a drastic realignment of Mary's loyalties and priorities is about to take place.

Part of this realignment is a normal progression in family life. Assuming John and Mary maintain somewhat traditional gender roles, work demands on John as breadwinner are increasing, just as the demands of a growing family are weighing more heavily on Mary at home. Neither have the margin they had before. But although Mary is feeling like John is noticeably less attentive to her, in actuality she is the one doing most of the changing.

Someone has said a distinctive of most women is that they simultaneously have several "windows" running in the "screen" of their consciousness, each with its accompanying emotions. If the "romance/marriage window" was the primary one to this point, now the "Mommy window" is in the forefront, and it is the grid through which all the other windows are viewed. What does that mean? It means her children are now a higher priority than her husband. It also means that John's "approval ratings" in her eyes are a reflection of how well he performs as father as judged by her maternal instincts. So when the baby wakes up crying at 3 am, and John simply changes her diaper and puts her back in the crib to cry herself back to sleep. His "ratings" are going to fall, because her instincts are indicating John should rock the baby back to sleep before laying her down, no matter how long that might take. And though John doesn't put two and two together, these "ratings" are having a direct bearing on how responsive she is to his sexual advances. Mary's gender specific affirmation still comes from John, but much less from his sexual attentiveness, and much more from how much he falls in line with the area from which her primary affirmation is coming - her maternal drives. In the meantime, his need for sexual affirmation has not changed, only he is getting a whole lot less of it from Mary. This dynamic is about to put their marriage at serious risk.

Though John still doesn't understand the dynamic taking place, he is discovering that he is perpetually in competition with his children for his wife's time, energy, and responsiveness. His resentment at this surfaces at times, in the form of distance or even anger toward his children. The more this

happens, the lower his ratings drop in Mary's eyes, and the less responsive she becomes. A destructive cycle is now taking place.

Enter Kim, a vivacious divorcee who John's office just hired. It's not that Kim is "on the prowl", but she's not adverse to male attention either. Unconsciously, John occasionally sends a subtle signal her way, and so far the response has been friendly. John is starved for affirmation, and its not coming from Mary. Now his "compass" is pointing Kim's way, and a similar process is beginning to that which brought him together with Mary years before. Soon John is helping Kim buy a car, repair her washer, and learn how to use new software. But the hands on the shoulders, the occasional hug, and the two leaving the office together frequently have not escaped the notice of Mark, John's best friend in the office.

"Hey, Buddy! I hope you're aware of what's going on with you and Kim, 'cause I'm worried for you."

"What are you talking about. She's just a friend."

"That may be how you're feeling, but I still think you're on dangerous ground."

John knows Mark is right, and if he noticed, no doubt others had too. John really isn't in the market for an affair, and he decides to put on the brakes with Kim...at least for now. But Kim's responsiveness makes Mary's unresponsiveness all the more obvious. The pain of disappointment with Mary from time to time is now settling into a constant dull ache in his chest, a dark cloud over his head. Kim's presence helps to lift that cloud momentarily. At least someone seems happy to see him each day.

Meanwhile, Mary is just as frustrated as John. She senses his disengagement from her and the kids. She knows John is frustrated at her lack of responsiveness. "What does he expect anyway. If he wants me to be a superwoman in bed, why doesn't he help with the kids, and make me feel like he really cares about ME instead of just my body? It's like...the only time he's nice is when he wants sex!"

So while John has disengaged, and is looking for affirmation from Kim, Mary is disengaging and looking for affirmation from the kids. In subtle ways she sides with them against John, she lets them do things she knows John disapproves of, and she gives priority to their events and schedules at the cost of doing things John would like her to do. When they need help, she's ready to jump to the rescue. But when John tries to show affection, she's usually too tired or busy to respond. While she won't admit it, she likes to be needed by her children in this way. In fact, she actually depends on being depended upon by them. This widening rift is more and more expressing itself in nasty confrontations between her and John. Some are explosions over seemingly insignificant matters, to which one or the other has assigned great

meaning. Others are long dragged out arguments. The kids are starting to be affected by the tension. One has become stubborn and combative. Another is sullen and depressive. John feels alienated by what he sees as the kids reflecting their mother's attitudes toward him.

As time goes on, John and Mary will work out an uneasy truce based on each "living their own lives", but the damage will have been done upon every member of the family.

The story we've been following is a composite of a number of real life situations, and various of its components are common threads in many families. So lets review some of the concepts which have surfaced:

1. Gender Specific Affirmation - we all need affirmation in various forms - from parents, teachers, friends, fellow Christians, etc. However, apart from such general affirmation there are specific forms of affirmation that our respective genders seem to "crave". Much of this may vary by culture or by individual, but in general men seem to need expressions of respect, while women need expressions of love. Beyond even this, there is the powerful affirmation which comes from a married couple's most intimate emotional and sexual relationship. When this affirmation is lacking, there is a tendency for men and women to seek that affirmation in inappropriate ways - most often through emotional enmeshment with their children or through an affair outside the marriage.

2. Sexual Affirmation - most wives don't understand how powerful a motivational force their husbands' "sex drives" are. The sexual affirmation a man receives from a sexually responsive spouse will often be a key to building that man's confidence and self-esteem, in eliciting a passionate love for his wife, and in encouraging an enthusiastic engagement with his children. Without it, men become detached and resentful, and vulnerable to sexual temptation and other forms of irrational behavior.

3. Maternal Instincts - meanwhile, not nearly enough attention is paid to the powerful force that a woman's maternal instincts can be within a family, whether beneficial or harmful. Just like male sex drives, it is a force that needs to be consciously managed, for it is closely intertwined with a woman's self-esteem and her responsiveness to her husband and children. These instincts are God-given and essential to the nurturing of children, but can easily result in undermining a husband's headship within the family, or an unhealthy enmeshment with children, or an elevating of the parent/child relationship above that of the marriage relationship.

In the remaining parts of this discussion, we will consider some specific ways in which men and women can be conscious of, and manage these drives and instincts in a more constructive manner.

Now its time to apply what we've considered thus far, and we'll begin with specific applications for men:

1. Be conscious of your vulnerability in the area of sexual affirmation.

Especially if you are single, or are married but not satisfied with the intimacy level in your marriage, you are vulnerable to affirmation coming from the wrong persons or in inappropriate ways. Flirting with women other than your spouse may seem harmless enough, but easily arouses emotions and desires which cannot be legitimately fulfilled. Yes its vague but ultimately we need to find emotional fulfillment in who we are as men, created by God, and accomplishing His purposes for our lives. Apart from this, we need to explore other healthy ways of being affirmed which don't involve entanglements with the opposite sex.

2. Recognize your wife's need to be affirmed in her motherhood. Just as you have a felt need to be affirmed as a man, and in your sexuality, your wife has a strong need to be affirmed as a woman and as a mother. Consciously praise her in front of your children. Reassure her that she is doing a great job as a mother. And try to understand what is important to her as a mother. Often her maternal instincts provide essential clues for how you can be a better parent.

3. Don't resent your children for the attention your wife gives them. This is counter-productive and will only drive your wife and children away from you. "Wooing, rather than warring is the way to win" in this situation. And if your wife's maternal instincts have gotten out of balance, look for positive ways to discuss and correct those unbalances. Assure your wife that your goal is greater intimacy with her as well as greater effectiveness as a parent, and try to find mutually acceptable ways to correct the imbalance. If you're at an impasse, don't hesitate to see a counselor, or ask a neutral third party to help you communicate better with each other.

Now how do these insights apply to women?

1. Understand and manage your maternal instincts. \_Understand that just as men need to carefully manage their sex drives, you need to be conscious of and manage your maternal instincts. Below are a few red flags which might indicate things are out of balance:

a. You find yourself clashing frequently with your husband over parenting issues.

- b. In a disagreement between your husband and your child(ren), you tend to "side with" the kids against your husband, even in his presence.
- c. You're willing to cheerfully expend energy for your children in a way that you're not willing or you begrudge when it comes to your husband. In fact you refuse your husband's requests because your children are your priority.
- d. You find yourself "celebrating your motherhood", but not finding the same satisfaction in your "wifehood".

In other words, there should be no doubt in your husband's mind that your marriage (and him) take priority over the children.

2. Understand your husband's need for his masculinity to be affirmed. You are the only one who can legitimately affirm your husband sexually. So it is vital that you are not unconsciously holding your husband's sexuality hostage to your level of satisfaction with his parenting performance, or your level of satisfaction over your relationship to your children (or even your grandchildren). Find out from your husband specifically what kind of affirmation he desires or needs most, but typically it will start with you responding warmly to him in general, and to his sexual advances toward you.

3. Recognize the validity of your husband's perspective on parenting. If yours is a typical family, your tendency as a mother will be to shield your children from difficulty, pain, and problems, while your husband may stress the need for the children to be prepared for the realities of life. For example, on a rainy morning you might offer your high school daughter a ride to school, while your husband may prefer your daughter get herself to school. While in many cases your instincts might be correct, your husband's perspective is also God-given, and essential for the well-being of your children. So it is valuable to discuss your differing perspectives and seek for compromises you can both be happy with. Ultimately, unless there is a moral issue or physical danger at stake, it would be biblical to defer to him in areas he feels strongly about.

If you are in an over-controlling or abusive situation, your husband is struggling with an addiction, or you are at an impasse on important issues, it would be wise to seek professional help in resolving such issues, or in deciding on a direction in which to proceed.

### In Conclusion

The above series points out the fact that psychological forces are at work in marriages, either helping or hindering their growth and success. The better we can understand those factors and harmoniously blend them, the less conflict and the more cooperation we can expect in our marriage and parenting. Specifically, we have highlighted the power of affirmation, the need to understand the nature of gender specific affirmation, and the ways in which men's sex drives and women's maternal instincts often clash within a

marriage. If this series does not describe your marriage or personal situation that does not mean something is wrong with you or with your marriage. So called "typical roles" are often reversed, and conflicts which occur in many marriages, do not occur in all marriages.

Also, in giving guidance to youth over dating and relationships with the opposite sex, the role of gender specific affirmation cannot be overemphasized. Young people struggling with loneliness and poor self-esteem are particularly vulnerable to affirmation from the opposite sex, often leading to unhealthy emotional dependence and sexual intimacy.

With all of the above in mind, it is my prayer that some of the content here may prove helpful to your situation.