

Level: advanced

Love on the Rocks

Introduction

To help you understand the title, think of a ship at sea. If the ship is on the rocks, it should be obvious that there is a crisis. Here, though, we aren't talking about ships, we're talking about men and women and the problems they have communicating with one another.

Activity A

First, a little activity that should give us something to talk about. In pairs go through the following three questions.

1. Just before you left the office this afternoon you found out that someone has been criticising your work. This has upset you. What's the first thing you will do to try to deal with the situation?
 - a. Phone some of the colleagues or friends that you trust to have a long chat about what has happened and about how you are feeling now.
 - b. Think about the situation very carefully to try to work out what may be going on behind the scenes, and then decide what you need to do to protect your interests in the business.
2. You are in a strange city and you need to find another company's head office which you have been told is only a short walk from the station. You know the address and you have a very good map. When you arrive at the train station what would you prefer to do?
 - a. Look for someone who seems to be a local and ask them the way.
 - b. Get out your map and see which road will take you from the station to the head office.
3. Things are going fairly well at work – you are managing to pay the bills and there are no rumours that you are about to be fired – but that's not to say you don't have some complaints: there are one or two things that irritate you. As usual, you meet up on a Friday night with some of your friends. What is likely to be the first topic of conversation?
 - a. Those minor irritations at work and the way they make you feel.
 - b. The latest episode of your favourite comedy series or some item of news from the fields of sport, technology or politics.

Look back at the answers to each of the three questions. One is supposed to be a typically male answer and the other typically female. In each case try to say which is which. Assuming you agree that it is possible to make generalisations like this, what do the answers say about the way men and women typically behave?

Activity B

The psychologist John Gray has some controversial ideas about the differences between the sexes and the problems this can create in relationships. Here are two different descriptions taken from Gray's book. Try to work out which is directed at a man and which at a woman.

1. Any difficult situation will have two aspects: one aspect is the objective development (for instance the fact that your team's sales figures are lower than usual, or the latest news from head office that some people will be given promotion while others will be made redundant) and the other aspect is the emotional impact of those external developments. Being in business means you can't ignore the practical difficulties, but they are not always your first priority. When things become stressful at work you are more likely to turn to close friends who will listen attentively while you explore the complex feelings that have been troubling you recently. Only if you can talk like this at length about your emotional turmoil, will you be able to sort out the more practical aspect of the problem later on.
2. If you hear rumours that your performance in the office is being criticised there is no question that this leaves you feeling hurt, but when it comes to dealing with this difficult situation you tend not to focus on feelings like that. The situation presents a challenge: someone has been attacking you behind your back and you need to find a way to defend yourself. You may want to talk to some of the colleagues you trust, but before you do this, you are more likely to withdraw into the cave of your mind to try to work out for yourself what the best course of action will be. Asking for help at the first hurdle or idly expressing how terrible you feel is to be avoided because it would look too much like an admission of weakness and incompetence.

How would you sum up the most important differences that these two paragraphs highlight?

Are these ridiculous stereotypes or do they have some basis in reality?

Vocabulary

Look for these words in the previous passage and then use either the context or a good monolingual dictionary to explain what they mean as they are used in the passage.

figures

impact

attentively

turmoil

withdraw

course of action

hurdle

admission

incompetence

Activity C

In his book **Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus** John Gray says he is describing real differences between the sexes that can often lead to serious difficulties in a relationship. Read the following scenario (which Gray considers to be typical) and try to put into your own words what the problem is.

A man and a woman return home **burdened** by their respective problems – he has been sitting on the train or in his car silently trying to work out the problems of the day, but they seem **insoluble** and a guy like this, when he gets home, is likely to have a **burning** need to sit in front of the television to take his mind off his problems and find a way to gradually relax. But just when he is trying to forget a confusing situation, his partner wants him to listen as she **pours out** all her problems, looking for support and understanding. If he has the energy, he may tolerate this just enough to work out what the main problem is, then he will **bluntly** suggest a solution before returning to the TV. But the woman doesn't want solutions – she wants a kind ear and someone to embrace her. Each annoys the other: he with his silence and she with her continual **moaning**.

The busier life becomes, the greater this **friction** will be. As the problems men face seem greater and more **intractable**, the more they need to escape and the less they are able to sit and listen patiently and lovingly to their partner's frustrations. The more demanding a woman's life becomes, the greater her emotional **turmoil** is and the more she has to express. If her partner is **glued** to the TV or out skydiving all the time, they will grow further and further apart.

1. How widespread do you think this lack of communication might be?
2. Imagine you are a counsellor whose job it is to give advice to couples whose relationship is on the rocks. If two of your clients described the scenario you have just read, what advice would you give them?

Vocabulary

Look at the words in blue in the previous passage.

1. First look for two synonymous adjectives used in connection with problems that are particularly difficult to deal with.

Now match the remaining blue words with the following definitions.

2. stuck (spending too much time in front of)
3. in an insensitive way
4. complain
5. express
6. confusion and disturbance
7. Literally: the resistance when two surfaces rub against each other
8. weighed down

Language extra

Look at the example sentence (taken from one of the passages above) and then transform the following sentence so that it contains the structure in the example sentence.

Being in business means you can't ignore the practical difficulties...

1. If you study in a class you are going to be compared to other people.
Studying
2. If you work in the private sector you will have to cope with some stiff competition.
Working

Only if you can talk like this at length about your emotional turmoil, will you be able to sort out the more practical aspect of the problem later on.

3. You will only save your relationship if you watch less television.
Only
4. The only way to help your wife deal with her problems is to listen to her.
Only by

Asking for help at the first hurdle or idly expressing how terrible you feel is to be avoided because it would look too much like an admission of weakness and incompetence.

5. You should avoid losing your temper completely with your partner.
Losing
6. If you destroy the television you might feel better, but it won't really achieve anything.
Destroying

The busier life becomes, the greater this friction will be.

7. If I am under more stress at work, I am less likely to say much to my wife.
The more
8. If I speak to her less, she feels more compelled to overeat.
The less

Activity D

Here is the response of Brian Kassar, a psychologist at the Montana State University.

1. Read the paragraph and then try to sum up Kassar's criticism of Gray's book.

Even if we just consider the title of John Gray's book: "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" it is obvious that the author is simply perpetuating the received stereotypes. He does nothing to challenge society's definition of "masculine", despite the fact that men who give in to the social pressure to hide their sensitivity and be more aggressive, assertive and competitive are more likely to develop health problems, substance abuse or relationship difficulties. Instead of being told that they are from the planet of war and aggression, men need to think about the way social groups use shame to reinforce the old stereotypes, and they need to be encouraged to share feelings of weakness, guilt and vulnerability with their male friends – something that will deepen those relationships and improve their emotional health.

2. Kassar is making an important assumption about masculine behaviour. Which of the following sentences best identifies that assumption?

- a. Every society inevitably creates social stereotypes.
- b. There are good biological reasons why men find it more difficult to talk about their feelings.
- c. There is nothing about the biology of men that might make it difficult for them to change the way they behave.

3. **Perpetuate** is a nice verb. Scientists used to be intrigued by the idea that they might invent a machine with **perpetual** motion. Have you any idea what that might be?

4. What does it mean if you **reinforce** something?

5. If someone urges you to **challenge** social stereotypes, what do they want you to do?

6. Now read a brief paragraph about some research into the differences between male and female brains. What implications could research like this have for people like Kassar who look forward to radical changes in the way men behave?

Neuroscientists at Harvard University have used sophisticated brain scanning techniques to examine how emotion is processed in the brain of children between the ages of 7 and 17.

In young children, they found that emotional activity was localized in more primitive areas of the brain, specifically in the amygdala (this is an almond-shaped part of the brain involved in responding emotionally to events in our lives). That's one reason why it doesn't make much sense to ask a 6-year-old to tell you why she is feeling sad. The part of the brain that does the talking, up in the cerebral cortex, isn't yet adequately connected to the part of the brain where the emotion is occurring, namely the amygdala. In adolescence, brain activity associated with emotion moves up to the cerebral cortex, so the 17-year-old is able to explain what she is feeling, and why, in great detail and without much difficulty. But that change occurs only in girls. In boys, the locus of emotional control remains stuck in the amygdala. Asking a 17-year-old boy to talk about his feelings is often as pointless as asking a 6-year-old.

7. What is the technical term for the outer surface of the brain that makes it possible for us to think about what we are doing?
8. We can talk about computers **processing** information. What does this mean?
9. How optimistic are you that men can stop being so nasty? Does their neurophysiology present an insurmountable obstacle?

Vocabulary extra

Here we have two groups of adjectives that could be used to describe people. Work in pairs with a good monolingual dictionary. Look up the words in one group. Write down the definitions and a good example sentence. Then explain the words to those who have looked up the words from the other group.

Group 1

supportive
affectionate
understanding
condescending
prejudiced
open-minded
unforgiving
short-tempered
assertive
callous
naive

Group 2

nonchalant
insincere
hysterical
submissive
domineering
manipulative
serene
exuberant
furious
charming
witty