

Male and Misunderstood

By LYNN MARGOLIES, PH.D.

Why do men so often find themselves in the doghouse with women?

They try to please. They try to say the “right” thing. They do favors, buy gifts, work hard, and aim to live up to their responsibilities as men.

The story is familiar. Adam has been married for 10 years. He goes out of his way to be agreeable. So when his wife wants her family to visit the week before his bar exam, he tells her it is okay. He wants to make her happy and keep the peace. Though secretly hurt and irritated that she didn't consider him, he can live with it.

When his in-laws arrive, he is late coming home from work, cordial and dutiful, though aloof. He finds himself inexplicably getting into political debates with his in-laws. His wife gets angry at him, accusing him of being unfriendly, distant, and argumentative. Fuming, he feels unappreciated – having given in yet again, only to be met by criticism. He can't win. His wife complains that he is setting her up, arguing that he agreed to have them over. Now he's pretending he did nothing wrong and blaming her.

How do men find themselves trapped in this situation again and again?

Men frequently overestimate their ability to sacrifice themselves and be agreeable. Accommodating feels thankless when they nonetheless encounter complaints from their partner. Patterns of self-sacrifice lead to a buildup of resentment and hurt, of which the guy is often unaware, except by way of his partner's unhappiness and persistent accusations. Men minimize their feelings, but unbeknownst to them, the hurt and resentment find their voice in another form.

These feelings may be disguised, even from men themselves, and expressed through behaviors such as forgetting, lateness, tuning out, silence, and grouchiness. When resentment manifests ambiguously and without awareness or accountability, frustration follows - without resolution.

This is not what Adam had planned. He was trying to be nice and actually avoid a problem. How could that backfire?

Men are under tremendous pressure to perform, measure up to other men, and be successful. They aren't supposed to complain, be scared, or depend on others. Perhaps the most challenging of the responsibilities they assume is making women happy, a daunting and seemingly unsolvable mystery.

Contrary to stereotypes, boys begin life even more vulnerable than girls — as infants they are

more distressed by separation from mothers, less secure, and show greater difficulty recovering from distress. Growing up, boys are shamed for showing sadness, fear, and dependency — feelings that are universal, not the territory of gender or age. Boys learn quickly these reactions will get them labeled a “momma’s boy.” Under penalty of humiliation, they shun vulnerability, eventually becoming removed from awareness of even their own experience of these feelings.

Later, this condition may manifest in reacting to women’s hurt by feeling criticized - responding with insensitivity, contempt, or counterattack. To ward off shame brought on by hurt or loneliness, men may act opposite to how they feel, “suck it up,” distract themselves through work and addictions, or become controlling. These unconscious defenses mask the part of men longing for love and support, thereby perpetuating misunderstanding and unfulfillment.

Men characteristically have been seen, especially by women, as having the power in relationships. But guys themselves know they are stumbling in the dark when it comes to relationships, while their partners can see. Many men secretly believe they are the only ones with this handicap, which makes the problem worse because now they also have to worry about being inferior to their buddies. Men get stronger and their shame diminishes when they have the courage to talk openly to other guys. Men who talk openly to other men in men’s groups improve their relationships with women more than those who just talk to a therapist alone. In talking to each other, they find out the real deal. They are not inadequate. They are just guys. And in good company.

Men are typically not instinctively tuned into their own emotional state. Without this information to show them the way, they are at a significant disadvantage. In intimate relationships feelings are the operative force and the “loudest” communication of all, regardless of one’s awareness of them. Beginning as babies, the nonverbal, feeling aspects of interaction penetrate us through tone, mood, and facial expression. When men are cut off from awareness of the emotional component of their communication, confusion ensues. And they are alone, without a guide.

So what is to be done? No one should be fooled by men’s exterior. Both men and women must expect and be “onto” the presence of a hidden dimension of men. This side of men must be greeted with openness and interest in a nonjudgmental way, allowing men to more fully participate in relationships. If women can recognize men’s strengths and appreciate loving gestures as such—even if they don’t yet hit the mark—then they will truly become allies. When men and women decide that they are both on the same side, men can finally score, but the win is for the team.

Dr. Lynn Margolies is a psychologist and former Harvard Medical School faculty and fellow, and has completed her internship and post-doc at McLean Hospital. She has helped people from all walks of life with relationship, family, life problems, trauma, and psychological symptoms including depression, anxiety, and chronic conditions. Dr. Margolies has worked in inpatient, outpatient, residential and private practice settings. She has supervised others, and consulted to clinics, hospitals, universities, newspapers. Dr. Margolies has appeared in media -- on news and talk shows, and written columns for various publications. Dr. Margolies is currently in private practice in Newton Centre, MA. Visit her website at drlynnmargolies.com