

# Understanding the Differences Between You and Your Spouse

By Shaunti Feldhahn

"At least tell me what you're thinking!" I pleaded. Without meaning to, I had disparaged hours of effort my husband, Jeff, had invested in a project with the kids. We were at odds, and it had escalated into painful words and hurt feelings on both sides. Jeff was heading for his basement workshop with me following behind, worried about the relationship and desperate to keep him from withdrawing.

Frustrated, he grabbed the handle to the basement door. "I don't know what I'm thinking!" *How can you not know what you're thinking?* I wondered. Fighting back tears, I felt shaky and in need of reassurance. Sure, I had a strong personality and sometimes didn't realize how my words were coming across — but why was Jeff letting that bother him so much? He was a strong and confident guy. If he kept pulling away, what did it say about how much he cared about me?

I had fallen into a common trap that ensnares millions of marriages: failing to recognize the differences in the way God designed men and women. Differences that He intended for *good* all too often divide us because we don't know they exist — or we don't see them as legitimate.

Men and women are equal in the sight of God — but that does not mean that we are the same. God created men and women to be different, and one key to a great marriage is to work with His design rather than against it.

In the years that followed those early marital conflicts, I started researching men and women for my books. Not only did I see these key truths staring up from my surveys, but I also saw how understanding them was dramatically changing my own marriage. Four revelations in particular have transformed things for Jeff and me — and maybe will for you, too.

## **Different insecurities mean that different things hurt us.**

I was shocked to learn that my confident-looking, accomplished husband was vulnerable on the inside — and that his insecurities were different from mine. According to my surveys, the doubt that lives inside most women (about 80 percent) sounds like this: *Am I loveable? Am I special? Would he choose me again?* This insecurity asks: *Am I worthy of being loved for who I am on the inside?*

The doubt that lives inside most men (about 75 percent) sounds quite different: *Am I able? Am I adequate? I want to be a great husband (or father or businessman), but am I?* This insecurity asks: *Am I any good at what I do on the outside?*

Because these vulnerabilities are like raw nerves, husbands and wives can unintentionally cause pain to each other. For example, a wife returning from a weekend retreat asks her husband, "Why did you take the kids for doughnuts on Saturday morning — in their pajamas?" She doesn't realize that to her husband, her question sounds like, "I think you're a lousy dad." Or a husband needing space from a conflict heads to the gym (or his basement workshop) and doesn't realize that, to his wife, his response feels like he's saying, "You're not worthy of being loved."

Neither of those feelings is accurate, but it still hurts. Also, the spouse causing the pain often doesn't understand why such a "little thing" would bother his or her mate. When we become aware of these sensitive places, we will know how to avoid hurting our spouse (and stop thinking of him or her as "oversensitive"), and we will be able to care for our mate in the way that he or she needs.

### **Different insecurities lead to different emotional needs.**

As my eyes were opened to these gender differences, the biggest change in my marriage was that I began to give Jeff what *he* needed emotionally, rather than what I would need emotionally. I learned that Jeff's greatest need was to know that I appreciated and respected him — even more than he needed to feel that I loved him.

Most men constantly question how others view them, so they are filled up by knowing that their wife has noticed what they do. Saying "thank you" or "great job" to a guy in the little things of life is the equivalent of a dozen roses to a girl. "Thank you for taking the kids all weekend so I could go to the retreat! You're such a good dad. The kids will forever remember the adventure of getting doughnuts in their PJs."

On the other side of the gender divide, men may know that women need to feel loved, but they don't always realize that because of their unique inner doubt, women need to be reassured of their man's love *every day*. Men are often shocked to learn that 82 percent of women are deeply pleased by simple actions like a husband reaching out to take his wife's hand or texting a simple note like, "I'm just thinking about you." Why? Because it says, "Yes, you're lovable . . . and I would choose you all over again."

### **Different brain wiring means different ways of communicating.**

For many skeptics, the biggest proof of gender differences can be found in brain science that shows men and women have different "wiring." The female brain is wired to think things through *externally*, so women process by talking. The male brain is structured to think things through *internally*, so men find it difficult to

process through conversation.

This wiring difference is most obvious in a marriage when there's conflict. When Jeff and I were at odds, we often found that he most wanted space when I most wanted a hug. In my hurt, I assumed that his desire to get away from me meant he didn't care and wanted to avoid communication. But Jeff did care — he just needed to communicate differently than I did. Most men need to pull away from emotional situations to figure out what they're thinking and feeling so they can talk about it later.

Because women process emotions by talking, what a wife least needs is a quick solution because that would cut off her processing. For her, those troubling feelings are what she most needs to talk through, and a man will be his wife's hero if he will draw out those feelings so she can talk about them.

### **Different sexual wiring means different approaches in the bedroom.**

In no other area of the marriage relationship do gender differences create as many opportunities for misunderstanding as in the bedroom. The physical differences between male and female should remind us all that when it comes to physical intimacy, we're simply not the same.

Women should understand that for most men, sex isn't just a physical need; it's primarily an emotional one. A husband needs to know that his wife desires him. That affirmation gives a man a sense of well-being that carries over into every other area of his life. Conversely, if he feels it's a little too easy for his wife to say, "I'm too tired," he has a depressing sense that he must be undesirable.

But in most cases, a husband can avoid that painful feeling by approaching his wife in the way that she needs — instead of expecting a response that he thinks she should have if she really desired him. Where testosterone gives most men a desire to pursue sex and be ready at a moment's notice, women still need anticipation time. A wife also needs to feel close to her husband outside the bedroom, so letting her know in advance what he has on his mind will help her to become physically excited.

There are certainly exceptions to these generalizations. But working with male/female differences, rather than against them, can definitely help couples live happily in sync in many areas of married life. Today, Jeff and I have an incredible marriage. Not perfect, of course, but in spite of our differences, we love being married to each other.