

When She Needs to Talk and He Needs Not To

By Shaunti Feldhahn

Not long ago, a marriage counselor described what she said was a fairly common scene in her office: a wife who is in tears because “he doesn’t care about me,” and a husband who is clearly trying to remain calm (instead of defensive) while he struggles to respond to example after example of how he “checks out” rather than “engaging”.

The marriage counselor (I’ll call her Katie) explained that in these situations the wife needs to feel heard and in the counselor, she suddenly has an authority figure who (she thinks) will be on her side to help her husband see the need to talk to her. And that means wanting the counselor to convince him to respond *right then* rather than “running away.”

Katie continued, “I used to think this was a legitimate need on her part – something the husband *should* aim for – but I understand you disagree. I’m curious why.”

“It’s not a matter of disagreeing or agreeing,” I explained. “It’s that I found something in my research that you as a counselor might want to know –if you don’t already-- as you help a husband and a wife navigate this maze of needs and hurt feelings.”

So below is the short version of what I shared with Katie, in the hopes that it will help you, too. (I link to an article with a layman’s version of this explanation [here](#); an article that you can give your counselees if helpful.)

Essentially, the wiring of the male brain means that most men (unlike most women) often need time to process what they are thinking and feeling before they can talk about it – whether that is in the middle of an argument at home, or in a counselor’s office. Where women’s brain wiring is best suited for verbal processing –she wants to think something through by talking it through – men’s brain wiring is the opposite. The male brain is wired for deep, focused, one-thing-at-a-time *internal* processing before being able to talk about it. In fact, in my research with more than 5,000 men, including 4 nationally-representative surveys, most men (at least seven out of ten) described that when emotions are running high, they have a “deer in the headlights” sensation. They don’t even know what they are thinking yet, and feel a desperate need to get some distance so they can figure it out.

A distance that then comes across to a wife as an uncaring withdrawal.

And let’s be honest – sometimes it is. Sometimes there are just uncaring, selfish men out there –just like sometimes there are uncaring, selfish women. But statistically, that is rare.

Most men truly care about their wives. It turns out that they aren’t usually *trying* to “check out,” avoid issues, and cruelly leave their wife hanging right when it is most painful. Instead, most men physically need some time to process, including figuring out *how* to talk about it ...and this is especially the case when emotion is “furring up the gears” (as one man put it). Because unlike in the female brain, the

presence of emotion makes it difficult for him to think clearly – especially before he’s had that processing time.

In other words, a husband is *usually* pulling away not because he doesn’t care, but so that he can talk better, later. (And also, many men clarified, so that he doesn’t say something in the heat of the moment that he’ll regret the next day. In other words: he’s instinctively trying to protect her.)

According to brain scientists, the type of neural signals that allow a woman to talk about her thoughts immediately may, in a male brain, take seven hours to pass as he thinks things deeply through. This is why many women have seen their husband need “space” after an argument in the evening – but then be fully able to talk about it over breakfast the next morning.

What I shared with Katie the counselor – which she said explained a few things she had seen herself -- is that a woman is more likely to get the communication she is craving if she will allow her husband that time. Both in the day to day stuff of life, and around the counseling table.

But of course, the husband needs to know something as well. Although we don’t have space to cover it here, this is the gist: because of the way a woman is wired, it is usually torturous for her to see her husband upset with her, so it is painful to give him the space he needs. In eight out of ten women, she will now be worrying and insecure about his love and the relationship. So before he takes that time to process, he needs to reassure his wife. Usually, she needs to hear, “*we’re okay*”.

None of this is a magic bullet, but it helps. Simply *knowing* this difference in the brain wiring helps some men and women realize that it’s not that “he/she doesn’t care”, but that “he/she is simply wired differently.” And ultimately, that different wiring was created by God to be part of what we love about each other in the first place.

What They Can Try at Home:

Women: The next time a conflict arises between her and her spouse and she feels her emotions rising, she can offer to “table” the discussion for a set period of time. This gives her husband time to process his feelings before both continue the conversation. She can remember that he needs space to think about his feelings.

Men: As his wife offers to “table” the discussion, he should realize that waiting is painful and let her know that he appreciates having time to process his thoughts. Saying something like, “I am frustrated right now, but I love you and want you to know that we are okay” will help her feel secure enough in the relationship to wait. He should commit to a time that he will be willing to pick up the conversation again.

For more:

For further examples and references of the differences in brain wiring (including the 7 hour processing time), see Michael Gurion’s book *What Could He Be Thinking?*

Tools for your clients:

See the article [*For Men, Time to Process Now = Better Talking Later*](#) here.

For the “other side of the story” (about a woman’s need for resolution and to be reassured), click [here](#) and [here](#).