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Relationship Technical Support

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Recently our counseling center upgraded computer equipment to keep pace with our expanding program. Not all went smoothly in the transition, necessitating a call to a technical support center in a foreign land where the tech possessed such a poor command of the English language, I was unsure at times what language he was actually speaking. After about forty minutes dealing with the language barrier, his curt attitude and no solution in sight, I found myself, an experienced mental health professional trained in stress management, overcome with the compulsion to start banging the phone receiver on my desk.

The whole experience served as a reminder of how couples often feel when trying to communicate. Because men and women process information in different ways, it sometimes seems as though they are speaking different languages. In general, men are more analytical, constructing a rules-based view of events and the world. They are typically able to compartmentalize and detach from painful situations. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more reliant on intuition when interpreting events and have more difficulty with emotional detachment.

Females are adept at expressing and identifying a broad range of emotions, detecting the feelings of others and responding with empathy. Viewing conversation as an end in itself, women tend to process information and feelings by talking. Men typically experience greater difficulty with identification of feelings and talk is more likely to focus on problem solving, ideas and theories. Conversation may be viewed as a means to an end with the practical purpose of solving a problem or gathering useful information. Men avoid verbalizing passing thoughts because they consider this unimportant information and instead use “report talk” to gather facts, debate opinions and solve problems.

Kristen comes home after having a terrible day at the office dealing with her unreasonable boss. She begins telling her husband Chad about her miserable day. Chad doesn't address her feelings because he considers this irrelevant information. He instead becomes solution focused and interrupts Kristen, telling her to just tell her boss to back off and begin looking for another job. Kristen gives Chad a look of disgust, leaving him wondering what just happened. He efficiently gathered data, evaluated the problem and came up with a reasonable solution. But what Kristen wanted was for Chad to let her tell him about her difficult day (possibly every excruciating detail), then empathize and validate her feelings. Chad, on the other hand, thought he had properly analyzed the situation, leaving him perplexed about Kristen's reaction to what he considered his invaluable gift of a viable resolution to the problem.

Hence the need for occasional relationship technical support. Educating couples about gender communication styles helps them learn how to use these differences in a complimentary way. Both styles are useful in problem solving, conflict resolution and establishing emotional intimacy, but couples sometimes need assistance in knowing how to respect the differences, express their communication needs and work as a team. There are no relationship support call centers. But fortunately if you are in need of a relationship tech, there are community resources with trained professionals who speak your language.