

Nanaimo Daily News (British Columbia)

July 17, 2008 Thursday
Final Edition

Men and women still collide; Relationship author is back with a new book 16 years after runaway bestseller

BYLINE: Julie Beun-Chown, Canwest News Service

SECTION: ENTERTAINMENT; Pg. D7

LENGTH: 997 words

Sixteen years ago, the title of **John Gray's** runaway bestseller said it all: Men are from **Mars**, Women are from Venus. Men are action-oriented warriors who want solutions, the family therapist and relationships expert said, while women are caregivers who just need to be heard.

But according to Gray's latest book **Why Mars and Venus Collide: Improving Relationships by Understanding How Men and Women Cope Differently with Stress** (Harper Collins, \$31), released earlier this year, there's much more to the story.

Men aren't just from **Mars**, they also have completely different hormones and brain structures that explain why a man can happily flop on the couch at the end of a stressful day while his equally frazzled wife only sees a long to-do list of chores, and fumes when he doesn't offer to help. The result? More stress, unhappy relationships and misunderstandings.

Q: In your new book, you blame modern life for creating tension and stress, particularly among women. Which aspects of life are to blame?

A: It would have to be the hectic pace and relationships themselves that are causing stress.

In the old days, the work world was designed to support differences between how men and women handle stress -- men worked in the jungle, so to speak, and women worked in the garden -- (so) in other words, the difference between the testosterone-producing work and work at home, which produces oxytocin, or the bonding hormone.

But modern women want to come over the male side, and men want to move more into parenting. It's wonderful, but there's greater potential for collision. Women are much more stressed from being in the jungle, and that means each sex has to find a better way to cope.

Q: So how we handle pressure in relationships is causing more stress?

A: Definitely. If a working woman has a partner who understands, it becomes a stress reducer.

If she knows there are certain stresses at the end of the day, like making dinner, and she has the skills to communicate that she needs help, that will relieve stress. It's not that males are unwilling to do these things; it's just that she can't communicate it and he can't anticipate it.

But if he knows what the problem is and he can help, his stress becomes lighter because success and problem-solving are what drives men.

On the other hand, if a wife complains of exhaustion because of her life, he hasn't succeeded in being the provider and problem-solver, and it increases his stress.

Q: But shouldn't your partner know you need help without you asking for it?

A: Not at all. There is a big hurdle, which is a woman being willing to ask her partner for support. She doesn't realize that men just need to be told the problem.

It comes down to brain structures and hormones. Under moderate stress, a woman's brain becomes eight times more active compared to a man's; his brain becomes active only under extremes. He's waiting for the emergency call, like the computer needs fixing, or dinner needs to be made. It's wired to the action part of the brain, not the emotional part.

A woman's brain is aligned to read subtle emotional and facial signals. She projects that on to why she feels frustrated, and it confuses him.

Q: So our expectations of men are unfair?

A: Yes! Women have a huge list of unrealistic expectations of how men should be and how they need them to be, based on how they themselves think and react. Men have a lot of unrealistic expectations as well. The reality is that women are stressed and men don't know what to do about it.

That is stressful because if a man doesn't know how to solve a problem, he says forget it, but it's actually a major source of stress, because he can't benefit from the relationship. If he doesn't know how to make her happy and lower his stress, he'll give up and then no one is happy.

Q: So the answer is?

A: There are a couple of really key things you need to do. First of all, it's about communication, especially about sex.

The primary reason for marriage is sexual compatibility, passion. When the chemistry goes away, people rationalize that.

But the romantic chemistry is the most important antidote to the stress of today. But there are other strategies, too. Second, have a Venus talk. When women talk about problems with each other, it lowers their stress.

They give suggestions and advice and solve problems at the same time. That's a moderate oxytocin-producing activity. But when you start doing this with a guy, he'll jump in with a solution. It's frustrating, because you don't want the solution then, you just want to be heard and get it out. So what I'm suggesting is this: Have an 'FYI problem download.' Confine your conversation to 10 minutes and talk about your problems. Don't ask him to think about it, solve it, or empathize. Ask him to just listen. It's an amazing experience, but your stress will go down more powerfully.

Third, have a **Mars** talk. If you have a problem to solve with your partner, discuss the problem without bringing feelings into the conversation. For example, if you say you're worried or afraid, and he says 'Don't worry,' you feel invalidated and that hurts. If you start getting emotional, stop and put the emotions aside. Stick to practicalities without involving emotional issues. Of course, it's not the only way to talk in a relationship, but if you save the **Mars** talk for finances or parenting problems or any highly charged conversation, you can put it off till you're calm and you can think about your position.

Finally, don't overtalk. Talking about little stresses really stresses men out. Men have 30 times more testosterone than women -- that warrior hormone. So if you come to your husband with five complaints, a man's defence is to meet your five and add five more. That stresses women even more. You're talking to him about what's bothering you, but he's competing, so you don't feel safe about bringing up your issues. If you say to him, 'Just hear me out, you don't need to problem-solve this,' he won't need to top your complaints.