

Who Are Men Really, and Why Do They Act Like That?

The Voice in Men's Heads: The Key to Emotional Intimacy and Equal Relationship with a Man

A workshop in five sessions, by Maggie Bryant

READING #1:

CULTURES IN CONFLICT

(From an article by Maggie Bryant, M.S., MFT)

If you're havin' trouble with a mustang,
change the bit.

--from *Never Ask A Man the Size of His Spread: A Cowgirl's Guide to Life*, by Gladiola Montana

Let's get something straight: whatever your track record to date, you are not a hopeless failure at relationships. Nor are you unconsciously trying to fail. Most women grew up seeing their aunts and mothers get along with men by giving in. Others saw their female relatives constantly struggling with men, trying to have a voice, feeling angry and bitter about *not* having one. As a result, too few women have good role models applicable to today's relationships. And very few have found a way to oppose a man's wishes without getting into a fight or having him stomp off in a huff.

Happily, there is an effective alternative to fighting or giving in. And it doesn't make men mad, because you're dealing with them in ways they recognize and respect. Most women don't find this alternative; they're accustomed to trying to get their point across in ways more natural to the female sex. When women's ways don't work, they don't know where to turn. Fortunately, you have found this workshop.

Men and women interact so differently with members of their own gender group that male and female societies ought to be recognized as the distinct cultures they truly are. Superficially, the two cultures share the same language. But if you look beneath the surface, male and female cultures are so profoundly different that men and women who unthinkingly follow the unwritten "rules" of their own gender automatically do almost *everything* wrong in the eyes of the opposite sex.

That's why I say *you're not a failure*. You and the men in your life have just been doing what feels most natural. But "natural" only works with members of one's own sex. Almost all the trouble that comes up between women and men can be prevented by understanding The Voice that is constantly talking to men in their heads. However, before you can see the importance of The Voice, you have to know why men react to it

Here's an example of culture clash that emerged after a couple purchased their first home together. When they appeared for marriage counseling, Clarence looked baffled, while June looked angry and exhausted. Clarence explained to the counselor, "We agree on almost everything, but when we disagree, June just digs in her heels. She won't work with me toward a compromise."

Clarence, an artist, had strong ideas about home decorating. He had chosen a slate color for the outside of the house and stark white walls with spare, modern furniture and abstract paintings for the living room, dining room, bathroom and their home office. June had offered no objection to these choices. But now she was insisting on a yellow kitchen, a soft rose bedroom, and a light spring green in the family room. This offended Clarence's taste. He couldn't understand why she was departing from the style they had decided on, but he was willing to compromise. If she had to have color, he was hurt that she wouldn't consider choices that would be more in line with what he liked, such as cool blues and grays.

June's perspective was that she had always wanted warm colors and had said so from the start. However, Clarence had advocated his viewpoint so strongly that she gave in on the exterior of the house and the rooms that were less important to her. As a woman, June felt that if another person overrode her preference, it must be so important to them that she should defer. She expected the other person to stand back later on and give her a turn, to even things up between them. Later came, however, and Clarence still expected to call the shots. June got angry. She could not believe he really thought they had chosen the "cold, impersonal" decorating style together. She had given up a lot, and now she was going to have her turn.

"You mean you didn't like it and you never told me?" Clarence asked, incredulous. "What kind of game is that? I don't want to live in a house you don't like! You set me up so you could shoot me down later!"

Clarence was interpreting the situation from a competitive viewpoint. By the rules of male culture, June should have made him understand that she did not share his taste and would expect to have her own way in other parts of the house. She had played a dirty trick on him. But by the rules of women's culture it was Clarence who was cheating. He had taken his turn and then was unwilling to give June equal time.

If June had known about the difference in cultures, she would have told Clarence up front that, although she hated to disappoint him, she did not like his plan and would not go along with it. When he got through competing (telling her she had no taste, was being unreasonable, was wasting his talent, etc.), she would have suggested they make their home a place where they both would feel relaxed, comfortable and happy to be together. Then she would have held her ground.

the way they do. And you have to know this too: in many more ways than you have imagined, men are different from you and me. Not worse, not more pig-headed, not more whatever you are used to labeling them when you're feeling hurt and angry. Just different.

Women's rules vs. men's rules

In relating to other females, women abide by a complex system of unspoken rules aimed at avoiding conflict. They maintain harmony by reaching solutions that everyone in the group can support. Women friends accommodate each other almost automatically. They ask, "Does this work for you?" before taking the smallest action. Characterized by emotional closeness, the culture of women requires:

- nearly constant verbal sharing.
- a high degree of sensitivity to body language and facial expressions.
- tacit agreement that everyone in the group is equally important – which produces a "flat" or consensual organization structure with nobody "in charge" or giving orders.

Male culture is dedicated to overcoming challenges, besting the opposition, pressing every advantage and exploiting every weakness. At its best, it is oriented to achievement. At its worst, its goal is winning at any cost. Its natural form of organization is hierarchy, not a time-consuming, consensus-based model. Its focus is a specific achievable goal, not something as "touchy-feely" as intimacy. And its communication medium is action, not words.

Each cultural system has advantages and disadvantages. The rules of women's culture equip a person to create harmonious relationships and to function extremely well in situations where consensus is the better model -- generally, non-crisis times in families and other close-knit groups. The rules of men's culture equip a person to take decisive action aimed at overcoming challenges, meeting emergencies, and competing effectively -- as a warrior, a crusader, a member of a sports team, a protector, a breadwinner, a manager, a politician and so on. Groups organized for these purposes are not close-knit in the female sense because their interactions are impersonal and task-oriented.

In an ideal world, everyone would be bi-cultural. Unfortunately, most men and women do not even recognize that *there are two equally legitimate cultures*. They sincerely believe their own culture defines the "right" way to do things and the other person's behavior is shockingly "wrong" and in serious need of adjustment.

Teach what you know

The good news is, men can learn that it's better *for them* to leave competition at the office and to live non-competitively at home. The bad news is, women have to teach men *how*, since women are the ones who're experienced in that way of relating. (Forget about trying to change men's competitive behavior at work, unless you own the company.)

For a woman to nurture non-competitive relating in a man, here is what is required:

- She must first develop her own "cross cultural" skills so men can accept her coaching without reacting defensively. These new skills won't feel natural, at least for a while. The reason is simple: they are not the ways a woman is used to relating. So, they may make her uncomfortable. And she may not be very good at them at first. The payoff from learning, however, is oh-so-sweet: men will actually listen to her! This is guaranteed.
- She must rise above her own cultural conditioning. Women tend to believe every relationship should be approached as a cooperative partnership and that "everyone" agrees the purpose of relating is intimacy. Men, however, view relationships -- certainly at work and frequently at home -- as a

Bottom line: the difference between women and men

On a blistering hot summer afternoon, Bruce asks his wife Rita to come with him to a warehouse to look at building materials. She doesn't say, "I'll go if you do it early tomorrow morning;" she doesn't say, "I don't think I can deal with the heat right now." She goes, gets dehydrated and spends the next day angry with him because she's got a vicious headache. If Rita had been a man, she would have looked him in the eye and said, "You gotta be kidding, dude. It's going to be a thousand degrees in there."

As you read here about male culture, keep in mind that its characteristics are most exaggerated in the relationships of young men. After years spent in the company of women and children, men have a tendency to soften. Nevertheless, to some degree their male cultural characteristics will always complicate their relating.

kind of friendly competition. Look at the way they relate to their friends. Rather than share verbally as women friends do, men hang out together pursuing common interests, compete over everything, tussle and shove, brag about how great they are, get into literal and metaphoric pissing contests, measure their dicks, out-shout each other, make bets and tease one another mercilessly. This is how they show they like each other. They're not looking for emotional closeness; they're looking for trustworthy pals with whom they can let their hair down. Until he's been taken there by a woman who has gained his trust, the last thing on any man's mind is emotional intimacy. Sexual intimacy is a different matter.

- To nurture non-competitive relating in men, a woman must ponder the role of courage in a loving relationship. Whether the man is her friend, her brother or the Great Love of Her Life, he is in no way eager to change his way of doing things. A natural competitor, he quickly learns what tactics best result in her giving up her position and accommodating him. Among those tactics will be actions that are hard for any woman to deal with, most notably anger and distancing. Women normally feel rejected by a man's anger and withdrawal. But when a woman abandons her position on important issues, she is poisoning her love for the man to whom she is deferring. This is why women must stop giving in and learn to take a peaceful stand, even one that might result in male anger or withdrawal. For a woman relating to a man, *Love means having the courage to protect a relationship from competition's fallout*. Later in this article, you will learn new ways of understanding male anger and withdrawal. This will help you not to take these competitive moves personally.

If you've made it this far without tossing the article in the trash or bursting into tears, you're ready to start learning **how to get along with a man, without giving in**. The hardest part of this job is what you're doing now. You're facing the woeful reality that competitive behavior is not just bad manners in men; it's their cultural imperative.

Ready? The best place to begin your cross-cultural skill-building is to understand what it means to be a guy. This information may be difficult to accept at times. Stop and take deep breaths if needed, but try not to be judgmental – not because it's wrong to judge, but because it will hamper your progress.

Whatever you do, don't act like a girl!

Competitive skills are learned by every boy as he is growing up. Peers, fathers, uncles, coaches and scout leaders instill these skills – some more brutally than others -- as “what it means to be a man.” If a boy is lucky, he also has a male role model who teaches him how to connect with other people through taking responsibility and contributing to the common welfare. However, the “act like a man” training received by most boys leans far more heavily toward competition than toward community-building. (Picture the screaming parents on the sidelines at Little League and youth soccer games.) Mothers may instill cooperative values (like taking turns and sharing) in boys when they are young, but these values go when boys hit their teens and discover that "acting like a girl"

hampers their ability to compete successfully – and sometimes even to survive -- among other males. Both genders enforce their respective cultural rules vigorously, especially in youth.

Doing what comes naturally pays off for guys at work and on the playing field, but it gets them into deep trouble when they use men's rules in a co-ed game. Here's why:

- From pre-pubescence onward, boys go after – and frequently get -- what they want; girls take turns so everyone will have a share.
- Guys share activities, women share feelings.
- Males act, females talk.
- Guys *presume* everyone else will look out for him- or herself. But girls are busy making sure everyone gets treated fairly. They may become so involved in other people's needs that they forget their own.
- Guys keep their "eyes on the prize." Girls value the process.
- Among friends, females bend over backward not to offend each other; guys tease to toughen each other up.
- Challenges make males feel most alive. Closeness does it for females.
- From puberty onward, men learn that almost nothing anyone else says or does is personal; it's just one more move in the game called competition. For women, however, *everything* is personal.

Whether because of nature or nurture or both, by the time they reach puberty, males require outlets for their competitive impulses. Sure, there are adult men who love opera and symphony. You can tell because they go when there's no woman around to make them. But for every man-hour spent in cultural pursuits, whole days or weeks are spent in competition. Boys express their competitive drive in sports and/or academic achievement – with sports, of course, delivering the greatest cultural payoff.

Most adult males express their competitiveness at work, where through skillful "play" they can succeed by achieving production goals, earning monetary and other rewards, and/or advancing "up the ladder." Many grown men also participate in competitive sports; others pit themselves against animals by hunting or fishing. Those who do not pursue a super-competitive career or participate in sports often watch and identify with the super-competitors of the sports world as a way to vicariously discharge their own aggression. (It's a wise woman who freely gives her man plenty of time with "the boys," watching his team trounce the competition and yelling his guts out.)

Competitive moves in relationship

Because men are so at home with competition, ***their first impulse in the face of conflict or disagreement is to press their own point of view -- vigorously.*** They may do this by crafting a superior argument, by shouting, intimidation or threats, or simply by ignoring everyone else and doing what they want. None of these methods is intended to hurt anyone else; in fact, in getting their way men are often attempting to achieve what they believe is best for the group.

Here's the rub: if the man has not talked the matter over with those who will be affected, he really can't form a sound opinion of what is best for them. This subtlety is lost on most men. They are hard-wired to take charge because, in the days when humans were evolving on this earth, it was the men's responsibility to keep the family safe under frequent life-threatening conditions. In those circumstances it did not make sense to take a poll to find out what everyone wanted. The man just had to trust his own judgment and do what seemed right.

Countermoves in relationship

Even today it is inspiring to see a man fly into action to counter a perceived threat against a loved one. However, acting like "the boss" in a personal relationship is not appropriate when there is no emergency. When men try to impose their ideas on a partner instead of sharing everyday decisions, women feel they either have to give in or be ready to fight all the time. If they are not willing to give in repeatedly or wear themselves out fighting, they see no alternative but to leave the relationship. I advocate women stay in relationship and use *countermoves* to cancel out win/lose interactions. Although women seldom know how to employ countermoves, men have been using them in tricky

situations since the dawn of time. They are a strong, peaceful way of taking a stand. A countermove demonstrates that you will not compete, and you will not give in. They let a man know he has to work with you as an equal if he wants your cooperation. The last paragraph in the illustration on page two shows how a woman might use a countermove. The key elements to a successful countermove are:

Expert male use of the countermove.

Even in the competitive world of men, it is often necessary for a man to employ a countermove – for instance, when outright competition would be too dangerous. This story related by a cab driver in New Orleans is a perfect example:

The cab driver was a government worker – a black man from Nigeria – living in Chicago with his four sons. The youngest received a note from local gang members threatening him with death if he didn't join the gang. The boy showed his father the note and begged him to move the family to a different neighborhood. His father said, "No, you will join the gang. And I will go with you." The father accompanied his son to every gang meeting, took a seat, and told them "don't mind me, I'm just here with my son. Go on with your business." Son and father only had to attend a few meetings before the gang asked the boy to stop coming if he couldn't get his father to stay away.

1. **A complete lack of emotion.** Women recognize competitive moves as violations of their rules of relationship. As a result, they are inclined to blame the violator. But blame is not appropriate when dealing with male competitiveness. *As difficult as it is for women to believe, men seldom know what they are doing wrong in relationships.* And the first thing a man listens for is whether a communication is coming from someone on his

team or from a competitor. If it is coming from someone on his team, he assumes it is helpful, so he wants to hear it. If a statement seems to be coming from a competitor, he rejects it regardless of its content, and more often than not he returns fire. A man who hears an angry tone automatically believes he is dealing with a competitor. So, hard as it may be, a woman must get her emotions in check enough to *stop blaming and just quietly state the facts*. For example:

Blaming: “You know I hate violent movies! How could you rent one for the only evening this week we've had together?”

Stating facts: “You must have forgotten I don't watch violent movies. Since we're going to spend the evening together, I'd prefer to get a movie we can both enjoy. Let's go back to the video store after dinner and choose one together.”

Ignore any whining that follows this statement. Really. Just pretend it isn't happening.

2. **Clear, precise and explicit statements of information about what you want.** Men do not pick up on hints; they only understand what is explicit, direct and out in the open.

Instead of: “When you're choosing the video, remember I don't like violence.”

Try: “Honey, please don't get a movie in which anyone bleeds, uses any kind of weapon or kicks or hits anyone else. Here, let me write that down for you.”

Being clear doesn't guarantee the man won't try to get you to watch a violent movie. But it does mean he is less apt to get angry if you insist on taking it back.

3. **Taking a stand and demonstrating, through action, that she means it.** If she hopes ever to achieve balance in the relationship, a woman must learn to *act* in a way that communicates *to the man* what is wrong and what she thinks needs to be done about it. Explaining seldom works, although in the interest of fair play, you should try it first.

Explaining: “When I'm around your friend Joe, I feel put down and ignored. I don't think he respects women's opinions.”

If he replies: “Oh, honey, Joe's a good guy; you're making something out of nothing.”

Try taking a stand through action: The next time your guy invites Joe for dinner, tell him you're going to dine out with your girlfriend. Then do it. If he asks you why, don't say something angry. Just tell him lovingly that you don't get as big a charge out of Joe as he does, but you don't want to get in the way of the friendship. I know you've probably figured this out already, but don't be fixing dinner for those two before you take off. His choice of companions has driven you from your home; they can cope or starve.

4. **Working toward a win-win resolution.** A man will not be happy in a relationship where someone else is “top dog.” However, once he understands you will not go along with being the underdog, he can collaborate with you on a solution.

Instead of: You get your way, *or* he gets his way.

Try Win-win: After you demonstrate you absolutely will not give in and do it his way, you suggest the two of you find a way that works for you both.

Countermove to make a point**Marriage is a partnership. You must share the decisions that affect you both.**

Newlyweds Phil and Mandy bought a brand new home together. Mandy was happy to leave most of the landscaping to Phil, who loved it. When he asked for her input, she said, "The only thing I want, and I want it bad, is a Jacaranda tree. I've been looking around, and that area to the left of the pool is the only place where another tree would fit. Just give me that." Two weeks later, she heard machinery outside and saw through the window a concrete truck dumping a load of cement into the place where she was expecting to see a Jacaranda.

Mandy ran outside and tried to stop the truck, but it was too late. The driver showed her he had poured the concrete into a form her husband had built. He assured her that he was following Phil's directions to the letter.

When Phil got home that night, Mandy was eager to work out the misunderstanding. "No," Phil said, "I understood you wanted the tree, but we needed a patio in that corner." Mandy was speechless. A woman would never have behaved in such a high-handed fashion. She began to wonder if this was what being married was going to be like.

Mandy sat around and fumed over her lost Jacaranda for a month before realizing it was up to her to change things. If she did not want to resent Phil for the rest of their lives together, she had to make the point that she must have a voice in decisions about their shared lifestyle. She had already seen that words did not communicate with him, so she took action. She hired a man with a jackhammer to come out and remove the offending patio while Phil was at work. Phil threw a fit about the destruction of his master plan. Then, after he calmed down, he said, "Why didn't you tell me the tree was that important to you?" The next Saturday, they went to pick out a Jacaranda. On Sunday, he drew up a revised plan for the yard.

Mandy's story illustrates one of the biggest differences between the sexes in how they operate. Between women, it is completely against the rules to use action as a means of communicating. Women work things out through talking. If Mandy and her friend Beth were working on a joint project, and Beth had made a decision that Mandy didn't like, Mandy would sit down with Beth and explain her feelings. She would listen to Beth's response, and they would continue to talk until they found a way to do the project that would make them both happy. If talking didn't work, the friendship would not be able to continue. One thing Mandy would never do is take unilateral action to cancel out Beth's decision. By women's rules, this would not be seen as a way of communicating, but rather an attack or a punishment: something harsh and rude that a friend would never do.

Men, on the other hand, tend to feel attacked by words. A man would rather be hit over the head with a two-by-four than talk about a disagreement. Plus, when they are engaged in something, they seldom hear what anyone else says. Men who do stuff together know that sometimes they may just have to take action to draw each other's attention to a problem. It's not pleasant running into a wall, so they will protest and complain. But then they will sit down and think about why that wall was there, and the light will dawn.

How to Get Okay with Taking a Stand

Since action is the language of male culture, a woman must become comfortable taking action in order to gain the respect and cooperation of men. Three things stand in the way:

1. Men, being goal-oriented creatures, become frustrated when a plan is stalled by a tree falling across the road or a woman refusing to do what they think she should. They may express that frustration through angry words or behavior. Anger scares the stuffing out of most women, who are sensitive to loud noises and tend to take things

personally. In women's culture, openly expressed anger is a last resort. It means, "If you don't get this, we're not friends anymore!" But for men, anger is just an emotion. It has no symbolic value. Nothing is about to end if a man gets angry. He's just using anger to expel the steam he built up in his movement toward the goal or, alternatively, he's using it because he wants to win and you've given in to anger before. So breathe deeply, tune him out, hum a little tune or look at the trees to calm yourself, and wait for him to wind down.

2. Men who don't want the consequence of exploding in anger will shut down, distance or "go into their cave" when they meet an obstacle, until they can formulate a plan for getting around it or can make peace with having to accommodate it. So, when a woman's decisive action interrupts her man's progress toward his goal, hours of silence may follow. Unfortunately, in women's culture it is against the rules to stop talking about a disagreement before it is settled to both parties' satisfaction. If a woman clammed up and walked away in the middle of a discussion with another woman, she would be communicating that she did not value their relationship. So that's what women think is happening when a man abruptly stops interacting. In fact, it may simply mean she got his attention. It's vital to understand that the man's silence is just a decision not to say the next thing that was coming to mind, because that would only have made things worse. He may also hope she'll forget her point of view in her eagerness to resume friendly conversation. She should give him a day to think about the meaning of her action, then open a discussion.
3. Women instinctively feel they are doing something wrong if they take action without first checking to make sure it is okay with everyone who will be affected. But you get nowhere if you ask, "Honey, do you mind if I send the workmen away because you wouldn't consider my needs when planning the addition to the house?" The thing is, if two women were planning that new room, words would have been the only thing needed to make sure everyone's view was taken into account. No contractor would have been hired until all were happy with the plan. That's the rule in women's culture. It's hard for women to understand that **a man who is in the grip of an idea, moving toward a goal, may actually *not be able to hear what anyone else says until he is stopped from proceeding with his plan.*** Do not be fooled by his saying, "Yes, we should talk about that later," or "Sure, I thought of that." It is likely he has not heard a word you said but is just mouthing whatever phrase will let him get back immediately to poring over *his* blueprints.

Women have to go up against so much in themselves to make a point using the male language of action, that they are inclined to give in to men just to save energy. And indeed, when an issue is trivial, there is no reason to take a heroic stand. However, there are two times when it is vital for a woman to act if she has not been able to get through to the man with words:

- When her safety or her child's safety is at risk. Typically, men are much more vigorous and physically capable than women or children. A man may not see the need for safety precautions because he does not understand what it would be like to need a handrail, a secure surface to stand on, or a hundred other things that make a woman feel safe.

- When giving in would lead her to resent the man. For most women, there is not much point in having friends, lovers and husbands if the relationship will be of short duration. But any relationship will lose its shine and then its viability if it is dragging a load of resentment. A woman's part in maintaining connections includes doing what she has to do to see that her needs are met.

Good news!

Your Secret Source of **POWER** In Dealing With Men

It may be hard to believe that your stubborn, domineering, tricky, willful, slippery boyfriend, husband, brother or father would ever submit to learning from you about relationship. That's because these men are such good competitors they have you convinced you can never win with them. And it is true you can never win *over* them. But you can *win them over*. That's because you have an immense advantage with men that most women know nothing about. No man will ever tell you what it is, but I am going to tell you now.

For a woman, connecting to other people is as easy as breathing. Even if your connections aren't the healthiest, they are abundant. You relate to practically everyone you meet, especially other women. Consequently, it's hard for a woman to imagine the emotional desert that is most men's lives. No one can be close to people they don't trust, and one of the bedrock tenets of competition is to trust *no one*. In an unguarded moment, a man might trust the wrong person and give a competitor the edge, thereby losing something essential to his survival or his happiness. It doesn't make sense to him to take that risk.

Just how lonely a given man is, depends on how competitively he deals with women. In fact, many women -- whether they realize it or not -- define "jerk" as *someone who is competitive in a personal interaction*. An "asshole" is an even lower life form. That's *someone who is competing with a person who is actively cooperating with him*.

Until some woman cares enough to drill it into his head, the average lonely male doesn't realize it is his competitive behavior that is angering women and driving them away. He thinks they don't like him simply because he doesn't have enough money, enough hair or some other purely physical commodity. Honest. That's how they think.

At the same time, men long for a safe place where they can relax, let down their guard, and feel connected. Their best chance of finding that place is in a trusting, long-term relationship with a woman. Sexual passion helps a man open up temporarily. But he can't really feel safe staying open unless the woman he's with accepts his maleness and knows how to keep his competitive nature from spoiling their relationship. Once he has found such a woman, a man will do a great deal to keep her.

A countermove between women

A woman may get used to the idea that words mean nothing to men, but it's a shocker for a woman to find out that her lesbian partner won't work conflicts out by talking them through. Women who have a lot of masculine energy can be every bit as competitive as men. It seemed like no evening meal could pass without Kimberly's partner Shannon responding with sarcasm to something Kimberly said or did. When Kimberly called her on it, Shannon denied it was meant as a put-down. When Kimberly talked about her hurt feelings, Shannon said she was oversensitive. Then Kimberly found out about countermoves. She began to design her own.

One evening before dinner, Kimberly stashed a sandwich and soda in a small cooler in her home office. Then, as soon as Shannon had sent a zinger her way during their shared meal, Kimberly rose from the table, said "excuse me" politely, went to her office, locked the door, put on some soothing music and ate her sandwich. A half hour or so later, there was a soft knock on her door and she heard Shannon asking what had happened to her. Without opening the door, Kimberly said "Oh, I had a sudden need to be alone."

"When are you going to come out?" Shannon asked.

"I don't know. Later."

Another half hour went by, and Shannon was at the door again.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"No, not at all. I'm just enjoying some solitude," Kimberly responded calmly.

After another half hour, Shannon knocked again. "Our favorite TV program is starting."

"I think I'll pass tonight," responded Kimberly. But Shannon didn't walk away. Kimberly could feel her thinking on the other side of the door.

"It's what I said about your hair, isn't it?" Shannon asked.

Silence.

"I like your hair, Kimmy."

Silence.

"I was being a jerk," Shannon added.

"I guess I do want to watch some TV," Kimberly said and opened the door.

The pattern wasn't broken in one evening. Kimberly got a little fridge for her office where she could keep some emergency supplies. She had to leave the table several times a week at first, but now it's only a couple of times a month.

Even the most gleeful competitor will eventually stop, *if it never pays off.*

Women are encouraged to think the men who pursue them are only after sex, because **men are not about to admit the truth, which is this:** men's competitive cultural code makes it so hard for them to maintain a close relationship *with anyone* that they suffer from a pervading sense of loneliness. Women have the ability to help men lay down their fighting gear and rest in the warmth of simple trust and love.

That means a man *has to have* a woman who knows and loves him, if he is to break the chilling isolation that is his normal experience. And this, dear ladies, is the true, vast and secret source of a woman's power – your power -- in relation to men.

But what about talking?????

While countermoves may employ words, they never involve conversation. If you have read a lot of books on how to improve male-female relationships through better "communication," you may be confused to hear that I do not advocate talking with men about relationship issues. Actually, I think talking is great if the man is in a place to listen, instead of tuning you out or competing about who is right. You could

grow old and die, waiting for that to happen. And it certainly won't happen before you have taken action that demonstrates unequivocally that you *will not* knuckle under but that you also are not competing for the throne.

The only time you can talk through a relationship issue with a man who has not had a lot of psychotherapy is when he has brought the issue up and asked for your input. Mostly, that only happens in fictional literature written by women. While you dream about the perfect romantic hero, you can entertain yourself by learning about real (good) men in this workshop.

Some things to think about

▶ There are things about guys we love, and there are things about them we wish would just go away. Most of the latter arise from their culturally bred competitiveness.

▶ The old line, "My wife doesn't understand me" is usually true. In the world of intimate relationships, the average guy is a well-meaning blunderer. The last thing he wants to do is hurt his lady-love. Unfortunately, she *has* been hurt by his blunders – and by his competitiveness, which she took personally -- so many times that she has lost the vision of him as well-meaning. Therapists observe that, when couples appear for counseling, the woman generally looks furious, while her mate is the picture of confusion.

▶ Men are vulnerable to affairs when they are desperate to have a woman understand their good intentions. In the first stage of their life together, a wife trusts her husband's loving nature. After being run over by his competitive side for a couple of years, however, she starts thinking he's a big jerk. Men don't realize the same thing will happen with a new woman if he keeps her long enough.

▶ Mostly, men are not trampling your feelings on purpose. You may find that unintentionally hurtful behavior stops if you let a man know – in a low key or offbeat way – that something hurts. This is why the word "Ow!" turns up in every language. Likewise, "Stop! You're driving me nuts." and "Quit yelling at me; you're scaring the daylight out of me!" are real handy phrases to add to your repertoire. Feel free to change the wording to suit your own vocabulary, but do be direct. Subtlety is just lost on guys.

▶ The Men's Movement of the 1980's, which came under attack from feminists for (allegedly) seeking to reassert men's dominance, actually sought to instill the less warlike manly virtues in men who knew no other choices than to fight or to grovel. Indigenous peoples have always had male initiation rites which included learning to seek a personal vision, to provide for the community's welfare, and to protect their village. Many tribal forms of governance are even today basically consensual and, thus, more like female culture, with its collaborative method of decision-making.

▶ Men use anger competitively (a) because it helps them win and (b) because it's one of the few emotions considered "manly." I know how debilitating fear of a man's anger can be; but, you can overcome your terror. You *can*. Other women have. The first time you

deliberately take action that risks rousing a man's anger is, by far, the hardest. Of course, if you know the man to be physically violent, that is another matter.

▶ Telling a woman you wish she would or would not do something will probably get her to change her behavior. Men find it unfathomable that women change on request. Men sure don't. So, (like your grandmother told you) just accept that you're not going to change men – or even one man. You can, however, change the way you react to men. And often, that will change the way they react to you.

▶ If you cannot imagine being in a relationship unless you can "talk things out" when problems arise, you might consider finding yourself a good woman.

An exercise in fear reduction

Give yourself a chance to see how men use anger as a competitive tool:

1. Pick one thing that you usually go along with just because you don't want the hassle of refusing. Don't pick something sexual; that's too hot to handle when you're starting out. Maybe he wants you to attend his club meeting with him or learn sky diving even though it scares you into next year. Or maybe he wants you to watch while he tinkers with his motorcycle. And maybe you'd rather be doing something else.
2. Next time he asks, say you're sorry to disappoint him, but you've decided not to do it.
3. Whatever arguments he makes, tell him he has a point, and you hate to disappoint him, but you've still decided not to do it. If he asks why, say, "I don't like it; I've decided to do something I like instead. Will you join me?" (This is exactly what men do, by the way, only they don't talk about it.)
4. When he gets to the point of yelling, sulking or whining, you can act like you don't notice, or you can leave the room without expression or comment. Don't budge, and don't talk to him about his behavior. Call your sister or girlfriend if you need emotional support.
5. Notice that when he is absolutely sure his yelling, sulking or whining won't make you give in, he just quits. He may try something else or he may let it go and find a buddy to share his hobby. He may even do something to please you once he cools off, because now he's not as sure of you as he was before.
6. Repeat the process with other items you've been giving in on just to avoid his anger. Keep it up until the threat of anger no longer scares you.

Recommended reading: *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, by Susan Jeffers