

For Men, Time to Process Now = Better Talking Later

by Shaunti Feldhahn

My husband is a thoughtful guy, but in the first half of our marriage, I often found myself completely baffled or hurt during a conflict by how Jeff communicated with me. Or didn't.

A typical scenario went something like this: We'd stumble into a disagreement or misunderstanding. We'd each try to make our point (well, if I'm honest, I was trying to make him see that I was right). Temperatures would rise. Soon I'd feel hurt (he would too). But more than anything, because we were at odds, I'd feel a huge need to talk things out and be reassured that we were okay.

Right then, though, Jeff would want to step away.

But why? We'd both been told in premarital counseling how dangerous it was to not communicate when there was conflict!

My reaction would be to pursue him. Upset, I'd follow him down the hallway, asking him something like, "Well, what do you think about what I just said? Don't leave before we've worked this out! At least tell me what you're feeling!"

But instead of talking, he would head downstairs, face tight, aiming for his home office. "I don't know what I'm thinking."

How can you not know what you're thinking? I thought, bewildered and hurt. You just don't want to talk to me. You just don't care!

A bit panicked now, I would plead with him, "Please, let's talk about it." I would say.

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Any of that sound familiar?

Eventually, once we started doing the research with so many thousands of men, women and couples, Jeff and I realized that a big truth was hiding underneath the stormy surface of these conflicts. A truth that applies not just to conflict but to all areas of verbal communication – and can dramatically reduce how often conflict happens in the first place.

You see, caring husbands or boyfriends want to communicate with the women they love. But how they need to go about it is likely to be very different than the way you and I automatically prefer.

Different brain circuits, different paths to clarity

Women tend to be verbal processors –we usually think something through by talking it through. We have lots of connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, allowing us to do fast, surface-level processing—and talk about—many thoughts and feelings at the same time.

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For example, if I need to figure out how to handle an upsetting situation with the kids, thinking out loud and talking it through with someone helps me deepen and clarify my thoughts. As I circle through the options (probably several times), I get more and more clarity. I also feel better because I have talked through—and thus processed—all those feelings.

For most men, however, that process can be bewildering—and is certainly the polar opposite of their own. Men tend to be internal processors. In most cases (although not all), it is actively difficult for a man to think something through by talking it through. He can choose to do so, but the more important and demanding the issue, the more difficult that becomes. A man's brain is wired to process one thing at a time, going deep within each one, rather than having all the interhemisphere connections that easily juggle many functions at once. So he's more inclined to (a) talk about something, or (b) think about it, or (c) feel something about it. His brain will tackle each task deeply over a period of time, but it won't easily do any of them together. (That is, if it is something requiring any thought. Rhapsodizing on his team's last-second win doesn't count).



In practice, then, if someone (ahem) presses your husband, son, or boyfriend to talk, that makes it harder for him to think things through. If feelings are swirling around, he'll struggle even more. That's why many men have learned that it usually works far better to get some distance to think about something first.

Let's say *he's* wondering how to handle a tricky situation with the kids. Here's how guys describe it to me: He will think through each option deeply, finish that thought, with all its implications, and then move on to the next one. Then, perhaps, he'll move on to exploring his feelings about the matter. Only when he has processed the issue internally will his brain be able to move on to the next item in line, which is being able to talk about it. And only then will he feel capable of the type of robust and multi-layered discussion that is likely to occur when he finally does talk with his mate. This was the case for the vast majority of the men on the survey.

What I have seen in these years of research, is that although women innately feel a need to talk right then, if we can take a deep breath and allow our man the time he needs to process things – with his agreement to come back and talk about it later! -- we will, in most cases, have much better communication in the end.

Resources

[Click](#) to hear one man's explanation of the need for time to process.

This article was drawn from *For Women Only: What You Need to Know About the Inner Lives of Men* [Revised and Updated Edition], by Shaunti Feldhahn, 2013. Click [here](#) for more about the book.

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

