

“How to Improve Your Marriage Without Talking About It”

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Chapter Four The Worst Thing a Woman Does to a Man --

Shaming

On average, men have more physical strength than women. The male thumb, for example, can be up to thirty times stronger than the female thumb (better for channel surfing!). Because of this physical difference, society has developed mores to accommodate and sometimes exploit the male strength. Men take on more dangerous jobs (and therefore are injured and killed more often). They're expected to carry heavy parcels, open doors, and walk on the sidewalk closer to the curb to intercept incoming mud or straying vehicles. When two buddies greet each other, they often flaunt this physical prowess with a punch in the arm or a slap on the back. On the other hand, a man *withholds* his strength when greeting a woman. He offers a gentle handshake or an affectionate hug.

Masculine physiology powerfully enhances the negative effects of resentful or angry behavior. The males of all species of social animals have greater muscle mass; quicker reflexes; and deeper, more resonant voices, specifically designed for *roaring*. The angry male voice gets deeper, louder, and more menacing, because it is designed to invoke fear of physical harm, whether he wants it to or not. Angry women can sound shrill or unpleasant, but rarely will their voices invoke fear of physical harm in grown men. Angry or resentful males-of all species of social mammals-experience considerably more blood flow to their muscles and higher levels of central nervous system activity than angry females, making their bodies more of a physical threat. Because of their physical prowess, male social animals, including early humans, developed a defensive strategy of forming perimeters around the threatened tribe or pack; and puffing up their muscles and roaring to warn, threaten, intimidate, and invoke fear in potential opponents. This instinctual strategy has obvious disadvantages for a woman, however, if the male uses his physical strength *against* her. For this reason, during the past three decades, we have developed laws and rules to constrain male physical strength, specifically in regard to women. Everyone agrees that it is wrong for men to exploit the vulnerability of women by doing anything that might invoke fear. But there are no such laws to constrain the female advantage in verbal strength, specifically in regard to exploiting male vulnerability to shame.

Words hurt. Words destroy. Words can kill a relationship.

When Pat did the research for her book with Jo Robinson, *Hot Monogamy*, she interviewed fifteen hundred couples regarding relationships. Several surprising pieces of information came out of that research, and three of them are very relevant to this book.

1. Most women do not understand how much it pleases a man to please a woman, specifically how important it is to the man in her life to please her. Furthermore, a man does not simply want to please her - he *lives* to please her.
2. Woman can easily see how frightening men are to them because of the threat of physical abuse, but they do not see their own power to evoke shame.
3. What women often interpret as withdrawn, uncaring men, for the most part, are men overwhelmed by the criticism and unhappiness coming from their partners.

Many women have no clue how critical and demeaning they are to men. When confronted with their critical behavior, the most common reaction is disbelief. “I’m just trying to make him a better person!”- that is, more thoughtful, considerate, responsible, reliable, and so on. Reflecting on this fact, Pat thought it might be interesting to list 101 ways to shame a man without trying. Off the top of her head, she came up with well over fifty ways she had done so, inadvertently or otherwise, in her own relationships. Here are a few:

- Excluding him from important decisions: “I told my sister we would vacation with them this year.”
- Robbing him of the opportunity to help (by over functioning and overdoing): “Don’t bother - I’ll do it.”
- Correcting what he said: “It was last Wednesday, not Thursday.”
- Questioning his judgment: “Are you going to cook those eggs one at a time?”
- Giving unsolicited advice: “If you would just make the call, you’ll feel better.”
- Ignoring his advice: “This is woman’s stuff - you really don’t know anything about it.”

- Implying inadequacy: “I wish you had been at that workshop with me” (not because he would have enjoyed it but because it would have “corrected some of his flaws”).
- Making unrealistic demands of his time and energy: “After you rotate the tires and paint the shed, I want you to listen to how my day was.”
- Overreacting (which is a form of criticizing his choices or behavior): “I can’t believe you voted for him!”
- Ignoring his needs (basically sending the message that they’re not important): “You’re not that tired; anyway, having company will give you energy.”
- Focusing on what I didn’t get, not what I did: “It would have been better if you’d said ‘I’m sorry’ to begin with.”
- Withholding praise: “Well, it’s your *job* to mow the lawn.”
- Using a harsh tone: “I am so tired of this!”
- Valuing others’ needs over his: saying to a friend, “Oh, he’s not too tired to come pick you up and then take you back home after we have a nice visit.”
- Undermining his wishes: Saying to a relative: “I agreed to have a quiet Thanksgiving, but if you invite us, he couldn’t say no.”
- Condescending: “You did an okay job picking out your shirt.”
- Name-calling: “You’re such a negative person.”
- Belittling his work: “Just what is it you *do* all day?”
- Showing little or no interest in his interests: “I can’t imagine what you see in that.”
- Criticizing his family: “Your sister didn’t even offer to help clean up the kitchen!”
- Ignoring him: Choosing friends over his company.
- Interpreting him: “What you really meant when you said you were tired is that you don’t want to listen to me.”
- Comparing: “The neighbor’s yard sure looks nice.”
- Dismissing: “I have to work” (implying he doesn’t)
- Focusing on my own unhappiness: “I can’t live this way.”
- Expecting him to make me happy: “If we just did more fun things together...”
- Making “you” statements: “You make me so mad I can’t think straight!”
- Globalizing: “Men are not capable of understanding!”
- Generalizing: “You’re always criticizing me.”
- Therapizing: “You are trying to make up for your father.”
- Projecting my unhappiness on him: “I feel bad when I don’t talk, so you can’t possibly feel okay if you’re this quiet.”

Other shaming favorites of women include:

- Believing they always know what’s best for the relationship
- Rolling eyes
- Giving “the look”
- Being sarcastic
- Ridiculing
- Suggesting a “better way”
- Having unrealistic expectations
- Criticizing him in front of other people
- Making him feel unnecessary

If you are a woman reading this and thinking “I don’t shame,” you may be right. But just to make sure, check it out with the men in your life. It’s best not to ask directly. Don’t say, “Do I criticize?” or “Do I shame you?” That’s like asking “Does my butt look big in this dress?” No guy in his right mind is going to give you a straight answer. Instead, ask: “What are some of the different ways I criticize or shame you?”

For an eye-opener, write “true” or “false” next to each of the following statements (choose “true” if it applies to you at least sometimes):

1. I exclude him from important decisions.
2. I don’t always give him a chance to help.
3. I correct things he says

4. I question his judgment.
5. I give him unsolicited advice.
6. I suggest how he should feel.
7. I ignore his advice.
8. I imply that he's inadequate in certain areas.
9. I'm often in a bad mood.
10. I think that he should at least match my use of time and energy.
11. When he says I overreact, I think that he just doesn't get it.
12. I ignore his needs that I think aren't important.
13. I focus on what I don't have instead of what I have.
14. I withhold praise because I think he doesn't really deserve it or because I don't want him to get a big head.
15. I use harsh tone to get through to him.
16. I pay more attention to other people's needs than to his.
17. I undermine his wishes.
18. I am condescending to him.
19. I lack respect for his work.
20. I show little interest in his interests.
21. I criticize his family.
22. I interpret the "real meaning" of what he says and does.
23. I compare him to other men or, worse, to my girlfriends.
24. I don't take his point of view seriously.
25. I believe he just can't see my unhappiness.
26. I think he fails to make me happy.
27. If I'm unhappy, I tell him that he must be unhappy, too.
28. I roll my eyes when I think of some of the things he says and does.
29. He says I give him "the look".
30. I am sometimes sarcastic to make a point or express my dissatisfaction with his behavior.
31. I use ridicule to get through to him.
32. I usually have a "better way" of doing things.
33. Sometimes I think he's a jerk.
34. I have to tell him what he's doing wrong.
35. I tell him that he never helps me enough.
36. He can't handle my feelings.
37. I believe that if his childhood or previous relationships were different, we wouldn't have these problems.
38. I think that I understand relationships better than he does.
39. I think I do more than he does.
40. My friends treat me better than he does.
41. He disappoints me.

Total of "true" answers. _____

When a woman criticizes a man, whether she does it deliberately or not, she makes it impossible for him to feel connected to her. Where there is a withdrawn or silent man, there is usually a critical woman.

Hopefully you've gotten the idea by now that women can do great harm to their relationships without even realizing it. The next chapter highlights how men can do the same. Please understand that the purpose of these two chapters is not to divvy up blame but to point out that we all fall prey to the fear-shame dynamic when it's allowed to run on automatic pilot. The extent to which we can understand and sympathize with each other's hidden vulnerability to fear and shame will determine our success in finding love beyond words.