Study Guide to Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus

By John Gray (Thorsons (HarperCollins), 1993

Key Concepts

Relationships, communication, self-help, gender rancour, men, women

Summary

John Gray uses the metaphor of men and women coming from different planets to illustrate the commonly occurring conflicts between men and women. When they first met they had happy relationships because they respected and accepted differences between them. Then they came to Earth and forgot they were from different plants.

The differences between men and women are not understood and can prohibit mutually loving relationships. Men don’t understand what women need and want; women don’t understand what men need and want.

Gray maintains that if we follow his guidelines we will be able to communicate with each other better and will be able to get what we want in our relationships.

Overview

1. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus

Men and women are very different in the ways they think, respond and behave. Understanding these differences helps relationships. ‘We mistakenly assume that if our partners love us they will react and behave in [the way] we react and behave when we love someone.’

2. Mr. Fix-It and the Home-Improvement Committee

Women complain that men don't listen but are just looking to provide solutions. Men complain that women are always trying to improve them and the way they do
things. Men value power, competence, and achievement. They need to achieve results by themselves. Women value feelings and the quality of relationships.

Women should not offer unsolicited advice to men as it would seem critical and unaccepting. Men must listen to women without offering solutions but in order to understand what she is going through.

3. Men go to their caves and women talk

Men deal with stress by retreating to their caves: they become more focused and withdrawn. Women become more overwhelmed and emotionally involved. They want to talk about problems.

Men don’t burden others with their problems—they feel that they need to solve them alone. They can lose awareness of everything and everyone around them and become distant, unresponsive, and forgetful. Women resent this but need to have patience.

For women, sharing problems with others is a sign of trust. They openly share their feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Women are not looking for immediate solutions but want to be understood. When women talk about problems, men feel that they are being held responsible. He should not offer explanations or solutions but listen to understand.

4. How to motivate the opposite sex

Both men and women are motivated by love. Men feel loved when they are needed; women feel loved when they are cherished. To become motivated men must always feel trusted and appreciated. Women must constantly reinforce the message that the man is needed. Women need to feel loved and cherished. Men should show empathy and compassion.

5. Speaking different languages

The languages that men and women use have the same words but different and often confusing meanings. Women speak in metaphors and generalizations. If men speak at all, it is very literal and they interpret women in the same literal way.
A man talks only to convey information. A woman talks for many more reasons and complain that men don’t talk. Women should support men in their caves by going off and doing something with their friends. Men should explain why they’re not talking.

6. Men are Like Rubber Bands

Men get very close to women and then pull away. After fulfilling their need for intimacy, men feel a strong need for independence and autonomy. After fulfilling that need, they will once again feel the need for intimacy. Men constantly alternate between needing autonomy and intimacy. When a man is pulling away he should be left alone.

7. Women are Like Waves

A woman's self-esteem rises and falls like waves. When her self-esteem is high, she has plenty of love to give. When she feels low, she is unable to be as appreciative and accepting of her partner. When a woman's wave crashes a man should go out of his way to support her. He must listen, validate her feelings and give reassurance.

8. Discovering our different emotional needs

Women need to receive care, understanding, respect, devotion, validation and reassurance. Men need to receive trust, acceptance, appreciation, admiration, approval, encouragement. The best way to get what we need is by giving our partners what they need.

9. How to avoid arguments

They should be avoided at all costs—negotiate, don’t argue. When a man feels challenged, he focuses on being right and forgets to be loving. He upsets her and invalidates her feelings—usually by trying to solve her problems. We need to accept that our partners aren't perfect.

10. Scoring points with the opposite sex

Men believe that they score highly with women when they do something big. Everything, whether big or small, scores one point with women. Women can score highly with men by using their scoring scheme. Big acts of love score many points.
11. How to communicate difficult feelings

Anger and disappointment need to be expressed in a loving way. Love letters are a good way to release negative emotions in a more loving way.

12. How to ask for support and get it

There are three steps to asking for and getting what you want. 1) Ask properly—invoking good timing and asking in a non-demanding tone. Be brief and be direct. 2) Practice asking for support even if you expect the answer to be "no." 3) Ask assertively. One of the key elements to asking assertively is to remain silent after making your request.

13. Keeping the magic of love alive

To be successful in relationships, we must understand the different seasons of love. We must not expect our partners to always feel the same degree of love as we feel. We must learn to love our partners through "thick and thin."

Ideas for discussion

1) How well does Gray’s analogy of men and women coming from different planets work? What are the good aspects of the analogy? In what ways doesn’t it work?

2) What is Gray’s understanding of commitment in relationships?

3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of Gray’s prescriptions for good relationships?

4) Gray has been accused by feminists of being misogynistic. Is this fair? Do men or women come out better in this book?

5) How consistent with the biblical view of men and women is this? What is the Bible’s explanation for the differences and tensions between men and women? Does Gray allow for this?

6) What place is there for the spiritual dimension in this? What sort of spiritual dimension is it?
7) Why do you think this book has sold so well? What lessons are there for what we provide for people in our churches?

8) Suppose some good friends were going through a difficult time in their relationship and were reading this book to find help. What would you say to them?

Back to Index