

## Claire's Tips and Tools for Relationships That Work

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### Are You Trying to Turn Your Husband into Your Girlfriend?

For years-no, make that centuries-men have been telling women their view of the world is the right one. So I guess it's inevitable that as women gain in power, they want to return the favor. The pendulum of social change usually swings from one extreme to the other, and then settles somewhere in the wisdom of the middle ground.

In the bad old days before feminism, men defined the terms of marriage. A wife worked if her husband "let" her, had sex on demand, and got her own needs met by "making him think it was his idea."

In some ways, I think the pendulum has swung the opposite way. Women are defining the terms of engagement and demanding that men engage in female-style relationships. Sometimes they take it too far and try to make their husbands into their girlfriends.

**But we'll have true equality when we find the middle way.** When both men and women learn from each other's strengths. Men have some things to teach women about relationships, too. Really!

With this in mind, I offer the following guidelines. You might be trying to turn your husband into your girlfriend if-

#### 1. You Invite Him to a Pity Party

Women believe that "troubles shared are halved." Men are more likely to believe talking about stress will make it worse.

Who's right? Actually, this is a therapist's dream scenario-they're both right. Men have suffered from depression, anxiety, and health problems from keeping things in. It deprives them of support and makes them feel like they're the only one who's not measuring up. AND women have suffered from depression, anxiety and health problems from too much ruminating. **It makes them magnify the negative and relive painful emotions.**

What to do? There is no simple rule for knowing when talking will help and when it will hurt. Figuring this out is actually the cutting-edge in psychological research right now, and we'll probably have more concrete answers on this soon. But there are things you can do to find your own balance.

First, know what you're looking for when you're talking. Take your own emotional temperature, so you can tell if processing is making you feel better. Lastly, now and then, try to stretch yourself just a little bit out of your usual pattern, and then see how you feel.

#### 2. You Only Offer Support When Things Go Wrong

We typically think of support as a shoulder to cry on when things go wrong. However, new research suggests that positive support-responding supportively to successes and triumphs-might improve a relationship even more than commiseration. This factor seems to be especially important for men. Having partners who celebrate their successes and triumphs

goes a long way toward making them feel happy in their relationships.

So, by all means be a listening ear when his boss gives him a dressing down. **But don't forget to rejoice over that tough presentation that he aced.** Let your partner know that you really appreciate positive recognition, too. And see if your relationship feels more satisfying.

### **3. You Think Sharing Feelings is the Only Way to Be Close**

Don't get me wrong. Of course I'm not against sharing feelings. Sharing feelings, especially in the present moment, is a key ingredient of intimacy. And in the past, men and women did far too little of it to have true friendships. It's a good thing that women have dragged men kicking and screaming into the intimate conversations that we now consider normal.

But we drag them too far if that's the only way we're willing to connect. Men tend to feel close to each other by engaging in shared activities, often sports. Women have often looked on this as the behavior of a lower life form. **But why is sharing a hobby less meaningful than talking?**

Think about it. Say you're playing tennis with a friend. You learn a lot about your friend by seeing how he responds in the moment. You share reactions to the same event, which is very bonding. And you work side-by-side to develop skills and meet challenges. That sounds pretty intimate to me!

I had a wake-up call about this when I was about 30 and I learned to swing dance. As a first-class emotion-processor, it was a new experience for me to get to know people only as dancers and not gather all the personal data I usually saw as crucial. I enjoyed spending my leisure creating new experiences with people, rather than rehashing old experiences. And I didn't have to relive the workday. How refreshing!

I don't blame women for wanting men to live in their world. It's about time the female perspective is appreciated. But when men feel like they're supposed to act like girlfriends, they go underground. This is the last thing their partners want. The next time you ask your partner do more emotional processing, try to balance it by finding a way to connect *his* way and see what happens.

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