

WHY MEN DON'T TALK ABOUT THEIR JOBS

BY GINGER E. BLUME, PH.D.

According to Massachusetts's psychologist, Kalman Heller, Ph.D. this is a typical mans' reaction to discussing his workday: "My work is so stressful. When I get home I just want to push it out of my mind and forget about it. I'm looking for an escape. To talk about it will only make me feel worse."

Unfortunately, this common male position actually increases internal stress and has a harmful impact on a marriage or any long-term relationship. Since women are much more relationship-oriented than men, they expect to talk about their day, work included. This article will focus on men who shut out their significant other, unaware of the negative consequences.

Some people subscribe to the fallacy that *not* talking about something is stress reducing. We've all seen the common scenario with men who have physical symptoms that could suggest a health problem, yet they refuse to visit the doctor. Clearly, clogged arteries are only getting more clogged or a malignant tumor is still growing, but men ignore the signs, as if the problem will resolve itself over time.

It's the same deal with repressing day-to-day stressors. Men are masters at compartmentalizing, i.e., separating out a piece of their life and pushing it out of their conscious awareness. They don't realize that the issue, associated feelings, and concerns are actively festering inside. Similarly, whatever is bothering the husband about his work doesn't go away by not talking about it. The underlying tension reveals itself in disguised ways including an edge in his voice, being overly critical of family members, a quick temper, sleeping or digestive problems, excessive drinking, affairs, etc.

Since refusing to discuss stressful things is not logical, why aren't men (the masters of logic) talking? Some men are concerned their wife will judge them as weak or ineffective (i.e. he can't handle work pressure or solve his own problems). Unfortunately, our society still implies that asking for help or not being able to solve all problems is a sign of weakness. This message is especially reinforced in our American sport's culture where the player denies he 's hurt during the game, playing till the end, and destroying his knee beyond repair.

Imposters

This fear of being viewed as weak is sometimes associated with a man's internal sense of being an impostor. It is amazing how many men secretly view their success, once their surface mask is removed, as luck or deception. For various reasons, they are unable to internalize confidence about being truly skilled and/or having earned their own success. Hence, these men become phobic about sharing mistakes or uncertainties.

According to Dr. Heller, a man's sense of being an impostor may be on the rise in our society. Why? He suggests that a significant portion of men have experienced one or more moments of achievement that were accomplished through cheating or deception. In school, for instance, an important exam or project was given an "A" but the boy had a

crib sheet or downloaded someone else's work (this is where the cheating is becoming much more commonplace, by both males and females, especially at the high school and college levels). Since psychologically, we tend to remember negatives disproportionately, any false victory becomes viewed as reflective of the man's lack of worth, rather than as an occasional bad decision.

Culturally, boys are still primarily valued for their achievements. Unfortunately, many men grow up with a sense they were never good enough to get the approval they sought from a distant, critical father (or mother, in some cases). For these men, they are forever lacking, and are often driven towards unachievable perfection in the belief that this is the only way to obtain love. This evolves into a major roadblock in marriage because it contributes to the work-obsessed husband who cannot talk about his work nor feel secure in his career or relationship. It reaches a notable extreme when a man loses (or is about to lose) his job and hides that reality from his wife by acting as if he is still going to work everyday!

On a practical level, if a man hasn't been sharing about his job all along, when he does choose to discuss something, it may seem too difficult to set the stage so his wife can understand. The husband feels it will take too long to explain whom the players are and what the background is to the current problem, so he doesn't bother. An advantage of regularly sharing information is that it is much easier for the wife to be in tune with what is going on. Sometimes even sharing good news is left unstated because the wife lacks the background information to truly appreciate it.

This process of sharing work issues doesn't take place in a vacuum. Some women bring their own anxieties to the table and overreact to hearing about their spouse's job problems. Images of job loss and financial problems may begin to dance in their heads and will become quickly evident to their husbands. Naturally this discourages the husband from sharing with his wife; even work problems not directly involving him. Also, if the wife is accomplished in her own career, she may make the mistake men are so commonly accused of, i.e., offering advice when it hasn't been asked for.

How does this unhealthy pattern get changed?

First, men need to know the facts. For example, did you know that single men don't live as long as married men? Secondly, married men in good marriages live longer than men in bad marriages. Increased communication improves marriages. Talking reduces chronic stress. Uncontrolled chronic stress breaks down our immune system, resulting in more medical problems and a shortened life span. So men, ask yourself: Am I interested in living longer? If your answer is yes, I encourage you to drop the myth that silence is golden. Then reap the benefits of getting daily stress off your chest.

In addition to the reasons already offered, it also helps to look at some of the unstated reasons for not talking about work with one's significant other. A husband who can recognize there's more to avoiding the subject than the excuse that it will only be more distressing, is well on the road to sharing. Even when that doesn't happen, just the willingness to give it a try, either to help the marriage and or to see if it reduces stress, will often result in a commitment to begin sharing more about work. Naturally, timing for this discussion is best done when the wife can be fully attentive. This may require scheduling "talk time" which may include agreeing to turn off TV's, computers, cell

phones, and ignoring phone calls.

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