

Why Men Don't Share Feelings - Part 1

By David Murrow

Contrary to popular belief, men do have feelings. But most men are reluctant to share those feelings with others. Women, on the other hand, have no problem opening up. Why the difference?

Men are trained from a young age to deny their true feelings. Complete this phrase: "Big boys don't _____." We enforce this rule with our boys from an early age.

Five-year-old Patrick falls off his bicycle and skins his knee. The pain is so intense tears well up in his eyes. His friends gather around him and start taunting. "Crybaby!" they yell. Patrick learns to keep his true feelings inside.

At age 9, a bully begins picking on Patrick. The more emotional Patrick becomes, the more taunting the bully dishes out. Patrick learns to suffer in silence.

At age 12, Patrick goes out for the baseball team - but is not chosen. He becomes emotional. His dad tells him to, "Buck up, and take it like a man." Patrick learns to keep his true feelings inside.

At age 15, Patrick is sitting with friends in the school cafeteria. He says, "Hey guys, I'm struggling with some fears. Can I share my heart with you?" Patrick is quickly laughed out of the room. He learns to keep his true feelings inside.

At age of 19, Patrick is feeling overwhelmed by college, the demands of his fraternity and his part-time job. His girlfriend just dumped him and his bank account is overdrawn. When he shares his anxieties with one of his frat brothers he's dismissed as a "navel-gazer." He learns to keep his true feelings inside.

Every time Patrick opens up and shares his true feelings and emotions, there's a man who tells him to stop. Or he pays a penalty for opening up. Patrick gets the message: to be a man is to deny your true feelings.

Contrast this to his sister Edie, who cries freely when she skins her knee, who's allowed to mourn when she feels rejected, and who easily shares her emotions with her friends. Why are women allowed to share their innermost feelings but men are not?

For thousands of years men have been hunters and warriors. Hunters had to project an air of strength and confidence at all times. If a hunter were to complain about the cold, a lack of food or his fear of being mauled by a saber-tooth tiger, he could bring down the morale of the rest of the hunting party. If a soldier were to speak openly of his fear of death or injury (or worse yet dissolve into tears) he could spook his entire platoon.

Men also had to swallow their fears at home. If a hunter were to admit the possibility of an unsuccessful hunt might cause the tribe to panic. Same with war - if a soldier were to admit to his wife he was afraid of defeat, morale at home would suffer.

Meanwhile, women were free to share their fears and emotions back at camp. In fact, this sharing was therapeutic and healthy for the women and the tribe.

This is what gave rise to the double standard. Women have been free to share emotion because it's beneficial, but men have had to keep their sorrows private because it could lead to disaster.

Thus, societies have trained boys from a young age to keep their emotions in check. This prepares boys for the day they may someday be called upon to project an image of confidence in the face of danger.

So we have yet another societal adaptation that has served humans well in the past, but has failed to keep up with the times. Today most American men don't go to war. They don't face imminent starvation. Sure, men still deal with bad news, unemployment and setbacks. But modern men rarely face the life-and-death situations that made emotional aloofness so important to our ancestors' survival.

The church can help men get in touch with their emotions - but it must walk a tightrope. It must provide forums for men to be real with one another, without pushing men too hard too fast.

Most men's ministry consists of Bible studies. We are focused on the acquisition of knowledge, which is a good thing. But we never get around to sharing from the heart because the format is wrong.

On the other hand, some men's groups are too focused on emotions. Some leaders press their men to share intimate details of their personal lives. Most men will not go there during an initial meeting; it takes time and familiarity before a man can trust others.

True story: My friend Brian was invited to a men's group at his church. At the first meeting the group leader pulled out a towel and basin and washed the men's feet. The next week only one man showed up. This was too much intimacy too soon. (Remember, Jesus didn't wash his disciples' feet until he'd walked with them daily for three years).

One other reason men have a hard time opening up in a small group: if I am completely honest about my struggles, I am handing you a weapon you can use to destroy me. For example, if I tell you I'm using pornography, you now have the power to wreck my reputation in the church, to destroy my family, and maybe even get me fired from work.

So yes, we want men to open up and be real. But the road that takes us there is a long one. A man must overcome the weight of society's expectations and a boatload of fear before he can let another man see into their heart.

In Part 2, we'll examine the other big reason men don't share their feelings: women punish men who are honest with them.

Why Men Don't Share Feelings - Part 2

By David Murrow

In my previous post, I explained the many ways society forces men to remain silent about their true feelings. But here's the shocking truth: wives silence their husbands as well.

Most men do not tell their wives what they really feel because if they did, their wives would punish them for it. When men tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, their wives often become upset. Very upset.

I've spoken to lots of men who decided early in their marriages to open up and speak the absolute truth. And their wives freaked out, withdrew, cried, threw tantrums and plugged their ears. These men learned very quickly that their wives didn't want to hear the truth - and that the key to marital bliss was to carefully manage what they did and didn't tell their beloveds.

Men, imagine what might happen if you told your wife one of the following:

- I disapprove of one of your friends
- I'm thinking of quitting my steady job to open a restaurant
- I'm unhappy in our church

- I think you should dress differently
- I want to be faithful, but I'm being tempted by another woman
- I feel unsupported by you
- I think you're wearing too much makeup
- I'm feeling a little bored by our sex life and I'd like to try some new things
- There won't be enough money for the vacation you've been planning
- I want to buy a boat
- I wish you'd lose weight
- I feel you're spending too much money
- I'm struggling with pornography and I need your help and prayers

Honestly, what would happen if you said these kinds of things to your wife? Would she remain calm? (maybe) Would she smile at you and thank you for being honest? (not likely) Would she haul you into the bedroom and make love to you? (not for at least a week)

Most wives would descend into a funk upon hearing these kinds of things. Many would blame themselves - "I've failed him again." Some would cover their ears and go running from the room. Some would curse or even assault their husbands (it's more common than you think).

So what's a man thinking after his wife reacts this way to his truth-telling? "I've made a colossal mistake. I told her how I really feel and she's angry. So I'm never going to do that again. Instead I'm going to carefully manage what I say and what I don't say. And I'm going to keep the deeply personal stuff locked inside."

Congratulations, women. You've just trained your husbands to keep secrets from you.

Imagine you're housebreaking a puppy. Every time he soils the rug he gets a swat. But if he does his business outside you lavish rewards on him. Eventually the puppy does what he's trained to do-not because he wants to, but because it's the only way to avoid punishment.

Now, imagine you're training a husband. Every time he tells you the absolute truth he gets a swat. But when he conceals his true feelings, you lavish rewards on him. Eventually he begins carefully managing what he tells you-not because he wants to, but because it's the only way to avoid punishment.

If you penalize your man each time he reveals his true feelings, here's the message you are sending: "If you want your life to be hell, tell me the truth. But if you want things to go smoothly, lie to me. Tell me only those things that won't upset me."

Don't misunderstand: I am not blaming women for every communication glitch in marriage. Husbands do the same things to wives. I know women who can't tell their husbands the truth because they're afraid their men will explode. Women suffer too. I get it.

I'm simply asking women to open their eyes to the possibility that they are contributing to their husbands' silence. And I'm asking men to be more courageous in telling their wives the truth - no matter the cost.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

A few years ago my wife and I entered an intense period of counseling to deal with this issue. I was deeply frustrated because she would not hear my true feelings on a number of issues. Whenever I brought them up, she instantly shut me down. Wouldn't listen. Accused me of being controlling, suspicious or ungodly for even thinking such things.

But now she's learned to listen to what I have to say - no matter what it is. No topic is off limits. Instead of carefully managing what we say to one another, we simply speak it out. Our marriage has never been stronger. The truth has made us free.

David Murrow is the director of Church for Men, an organization that helps congregations reach more men and boys. In his day job, David works as a television producer and writer. He's the author of three books, including **Why Men Hate Going To Church** and **What Your Husband Isn't Telling You**.