

How does this look, dear?

• DR BATYA L. LUDMAN

Since men and women think differently, at times it can be a major challenge just to figure out what the other sex means when asking a question. A wise man knows that few questions have simple answers. Not to gender-stereotype (too much) or pass judgment, I smiled as a male client related how he had learned to field his wife's question, as she showed him what he saw as three almost identical-looking dresses, wanting his opinion as to which he thought she should wear.

Men, in general, care less about their own personal appearance, whereas women from a very early age seem to be more influenced by what others think or do and get caught up in body-image issues and fashion trends. Of course, these are stereotypes; but more often than not, they hold true.

This explains, in part, why men are content with their three pairs of shoes, while women have 30 but are not really happy with any; why women have numerous black skirts or pants, and men have just a few and seem satisfied. Women know that each pair of shoes or pants, each skirt, is very different, each having its own function, and that this is simply the way it is, was and will be.

Men, too, have learned to understand (perhaps the hard way) that when women ask "Do I look fat in this, dear?" or "How does this look, dear?" they are asking a very specific question, and only the "right" response is acceptable. But knowing just what that right response is can be hit or miss and, at times, completely illusory.

Never feel that no matter what you say, you just can't please your partner. You simply need to figure out exactly how to say it; and once you have mastered this, you can say pretty much anything, and she will love you for it

While familiar with these questions, since they occur with remarkable frequency, men themselves rarely ask or really care about how they look beyond a casual and generic "Is this okay?" And the response "It looks fine" that a wife may give her husband just doesn't cut it in reverse. "It's fine," when coming from a man's mouth, is heard by the female brain as, at best, "It's okay," and "okay" is rendered as "barely passable," which leaves her thinking that she doesn't look great and therefore not "fine" at all. Men, not realizing that this is how their words get filtered and interpreted, are then usually subjected to a barrage of even more questions: "Does it really look okay? Do I look fat? How does it compare to 'x'? Was 'y' better? It doesn't look good, does it?" and a hasty wardrobe change possibly then ensues.

While it would be easy to blame females for having low self-esteem or body-image issues, the illustrative case below says something very different.

A woman on the way to buy groceries with her husband spots a dress in the store window. Hearing that he likes it, she tries it on. She walks out of the dressing room,



MODELS TRY on dresses during a fashion event aimed at Orthodox Jewish women early this year in Jerusalem. (Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

and he says, "It's nice, it's lovely, get it." The woman returns to the dressing room, decides she likes it better on the hanger than on herself, determines that it's not for her for multiple reasons, and exits the dressing room, discarding the dress.

The husband asks where the dress is. She states she's not buying it, and he is incredulous. He liked it, can't fathom her reasons for dumping the dress, and is now annoyed and upset. He hates shopping at the best of times and wonders, Why bother coming along if she doesn't value my opinion?

Of course, she doesn't understand why he's making such a big deal of it all, because while valuing his opinion, she values her own as well. Essentially, if he didn't like the dress, she probably wouldn't get it, but his liking it is not a sufficient reason for purchasing it.

Typically, men like to problem-solve. This includes not just their own problems but those of others as well. Women, on the other hand, like to process things: talk it out and think aloud, while finding their own solution.

So after trying it on, she decided against it and moved on. In his mind the dress was fine; get it, and the issue is resolved. As a female, she tried, without hurting his feelings, to explain that she valued his opinion, but obviously she has the final say.

How, as a man, will you know if you answered the "How do I look? Which should I wear?" questions correctly?

My client was quite surprised, but knew by his wife's response that he got it right. Rather than give a direct answer (the red dress), he tried to first ascertain what she was really asking and only then find a way to support her thinking when possible.

If she said, "I'm leaning toward the red dress, as it feels the most comfortable, and I think it looks the best," he might say, "It sounds like you prefer the red dress. You look amazing in it, and it's perfect for the party." He might also say, "The black one makes a real statement also, so whatever you choose would be good."

Given this assistance in her decision-making, she'll probably be greatly appreciative of his input, and in the end choose what she likes.

This is very similar to how two women (A and B) dialogue, and reflects what she is really looking for from her male partner:

Woman A: Which dress do you like better?

Woman B: Why are you asking? Which do you prefer?

Woman A explains her reasons.

Woman B responds: "Hmm, I see your point" or "True, but...." And they discuss it briefly.

Woman A: "Okay, thanks. I'll wear this one," ending this very short discussion.

Remember, men and women sort out their questions and answers differently, and that's in part what makes a relationship wonderfully exciting. Never feel that no matter what you say, you just can't please your partner. You simply need to figure out exactly how to say it; and once you have mastered this, you can say pretty much anything, and she will love you for it.

Women, too, need to understand how the men in their lives think. More about that another time. ■

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