

What can I do to be helpful?

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City boy David is persuaded by country girl Julie to go camping. Putting up the tent, David pounds the tent stake into his finger with the hammer and begins hopping and dancing about while crying out many expletives about the absurdity of going into the woods when staying in the city was just fine. Realizing that she may have made a serious error in judgment when suggesting camping as a shared experience, Julie runs over to David immediately upon hearing him scream to see how he is and offer comfort and assistance.

To her surprise, David is annoyed by Julie's presence and gruffly asks her to leave him alone. His angry tone is quite confusing, given that she is trying so hard to be helpful and supportive. When, 10 minutes later, David comes over to Julie, acting as if nothing had ever happened, it is Julie's turn to be annoyed and silent. It was bad enough that he didn't want her, chased her away and left her feeling rejected, but to not even attempt to apologize for his "abusive behavior" just made things worse. After a few hours, Julie decides to forgive David and they try not letting the "fight" dampen their evening. The next day, returning to the city, David gets a tetanus shot.

When it comes to problem solving, men and women often think differently. If one doesn't cross into the other person's world in an attempt to understand the thinking of their partner by truly putting themselves in that other person's shoes, instead of just seeing things from their own perspective, they may inadvertently jeopardize the very relationship they care so much about. In blaming the other for their seemingly unacceptable and inappropriate behavior, feeling that it's always the other person's fault, the desire for goodwill lessens and the relationship will only suffer.

In analyzing the tent-stake scenario, when David got upset – whether because he thought it was a crazy idea to go camping in the first place, was angry at his own carelessness, or simply reacted in pain – his response was to withdraw. He needed this "alone time" to breathe, calm down from the shock of the physical and emotional trauma, and regain his composure, so that he could refocus and move on. Having done this and feeling better, he could then approach Julie. Julie had no idea that this is what David needed, and so being a caregiver, did exactly the opposite. Seeing her partner agitated and in pain, she wanted very much to "connect" with him in order to help.

"Swooping in" to assist and be there for David was perceived by him as intrusive and surprisingly, unhelpful, given his need to be alone, calm down, and solve his own problem. Julie's presence was an unwanted distraction, and having difficulty using language as a tool when under stress, he quickly shooed her away in order to retreat, calm himself, focus and recover. This left Julie feeling hurt and rejected when she was only trying to help, and David, absorbed in his pain, was unaware of the impact of his actions. In doing what came naturally for each of them, without



(Damon Gascon/TNS)

any understanding of the other, they inadvertently created increased anger and distance. Interestingly, had the situation been reversed and Julie was injured, if David left her alone, she would have been terribly upset. David might have found it strange that when she was hurt, he had a valuable role to play.

FAST FORWARD 10 years. David is sitting at the kitchen table deeply absorbed in sorting through his tax return, which is almost due. Julie walks in, asks David what he thinks she should make for dinner, and is met by a very clear and dismissive, "Don't talk to me. I can't talk now." Having learned from the "tent-peg episode," upon hearing David's comment Julie replies, "Let me know when we can talk," and calmly leaves the room. David soon thereafter solves his immediate issue and while far from finished with the arduous task, is at a point where he could take a break, and they make dinner together.

Julie knows that David's strength is not in multitasking and that he finds talking disruptive when he's focusing on something else. She knows, too, that he's very much committed to her and tries to be interested in all that she has to say. In order to listen and focus, he needs to be free from distraction and needs Julie to state clearly what she needs. Whether she wants to just schmooze or to engage in a deep meaningful discussion, unless told, his default is to go into problem-solving mode. She has learned that she must state what she needs, be clear and succinct and not chat away when he is engrossed in anything from parking a car to working on a project.

When a man is silent, women think something is wrong. When a woman is silent, a man may not notice at first, enjoying the quiet. Often silence means that she is upset, and when a man doesn't respond, she feels more isolated.

This column and the previous column have highlighted some of the differences between men and women with respect to communication. There are so many other differences, but as we know, in a good relationship, people work on understanding the other person, not on passing judgment or making assumptions. In my work with any dyad, I encourage each person to ask of the other one very important question: "What can I do to be helpful?" and hear what is said in return. In this small but very important gesture of truly paying attention to someone else's needs, we bring a very big gift into our relationships. Julie and David learned how to do this well.

As one of my beloved teachers has reminded me, we imagine that our lives are guided and judged solely by the big things in life, but it is the small things in life that really define us and who we are. ■

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