

# Why Guys Don't Seem to Listen

To end communication woes, says linguist Deborah Tannen, we need to learn the language of men—and women.



Deborah decodes the male dialect.

■ You've found your soul mate—or thought you had—yet the longer you're together, the more tiffs you seem to be having. What's behind the puzzling pattern? After researching linguistic patterns for 25 years, I can tell you that the source of your frustration may be that men and women can walk away from the same conversation with totally different interpretations of what was said. Here are the four most confusing aspects of guy/girl talk—and how to clear them up.

## Can Guys Apologize?

Many small arguments turn into big brawls because the woman doesn't hear three magic words: "I am sorry." An example: One day, Nancy asked Dan to mail a letter for her. He agreed, but later she found the letter in his car. "Oh, I forgot," Dan said casually. Nancy was annoyed that Dan had failed to mail her letter, but she was absolutely furious that he didn't apologize. To Dan, the damage was done—what good would an apology do? But to Nancy, not apologizing means he doesn't care about having let her down. Since women are sensitive to being pushed away, while men are sensitive to being criticized, the more she insists that he apologize, the more he feels she is trying to humiliate him. He could learn to say he's sorry to dispel her anger, or she could forget about hearing the words and look for other signs that he will try to do better in the future.

*Deborah Tannen's latest book, I ONLY SAY THIS BECAUSE I LOVE YOU: TALKING IN FAMILIES, will be published this month by Random House.*

## Complaint Quandaries

Another conversational ritual that women often use but men don't—and therefore misinterpret—is "troubles talk." For instance, Trudy tells Brad that she's aggravated because her boss gave her a job to do at 3 P.M. and wanted it done by 5. "Tell him that you can't do it and he should have given it to you earlier," Brad advises. "I can't tell my boss that," Trudy protests. Now it's Brad who's aggravating her. She wasn't looking for him to fix her problem; all she wanted was something a female friend might supply—reassurance that he understands what she feels. Because Brad isn't familiar with the ritual nature of Trudy's complaints, he takes them literally and thinks she wants advice. The solution is understanding the differences: If you can explain how "troubles talk" works for women, your man might start listening—and feel relieved of the burden of finding solutions. (Or you could stick to having "troubles talk" with your female friends.)

## Joking, Not Jabbing

Women take men too literally as well, especially when it comes to teasing. For example, when Sue got a dreadful haircut, Stuart tried to cheer her up by saying "You can always tell people you fell in the path of the lawn mower." She was horrified—and hurt. She wanted him to tell her that it didn't look so bad, even if he thought otherwise. But that's exactly what Stuart thought he was saying. For men, mock insults imply, "If we can joke about it, it's not so bad." Here, women need to realize that teasing is a way boys and men show af-

fection: They wouldn't talk that way to someone they didn't feel close to. But if his comments really sting, let him know that you don't take teasing in the same spirit and he may keep it more in check.

## Body-Language Barriers

One of the biggest complaints I hear from women is "He doesn't listen to me." Sometimes this may be true (see Complaint Quandaries!), but other times, they just get this impression from how men sit and fix their gaze in conversation. Women tend to face each other head-on when they talk. Men tend to sit at angles—or even parallel—to a person and look around the room. For women, the direct gaze signals, "I'm interested; I'm listening." But for men, a direct stare can feel like a challenge.

A student in one of my classes said that whenever she wanted to have a talk with her boyfriend, he'd lie down on the floor and put his arm over his eyes. "You're going to sleep!" she'd shout. But after figuring out the difference in body language and talking with him about it, she decided to accept his explanation that by closing his eyes, he was better able to concentrate. The next time she wanted to talk, he began lying down as usual, but then he sat up and looked at her. "Now that I understand why it means so much to you," he said, "I'm going to try to do it." No one wants to change when they're being told that what they are doing is wrong. But if you think of these communication pitfalls as neutral gender differences, you can both make adjustments. Then you can find out whether you really are soul mates after all. ■