NEW-AGE SENSITIVE GUYS

These days, we expect men to be more sensitive, vulnerable, loving, sympathetic, and supportive; to be less competitive, territorial, and violent; to be monogamous and to share the child rearing fifty-fifty. Actually, what we're asking is that men be more like women, and for some that's a tall order. Their biology protests You're joking, right? I'm not programmed for this. And yet, without such mutual concern and equality modern life would be intolerable for both men and women. An ironic footnote is that, as men become the New-Age sensitive guys women want, some women are less able to find them sexually attractive because they strike too many feminine chords. I find this amusing because it reminds me that we're dealing with ancient hungers, ancient drives, and trying to adapt them to a society for which they weren't designed.*

To their credit, many men do soften their instincts. Indeed, in a world plagued by war, this is essential. We no longer live in small bands, armed with spears and rocks, where words like “anger,” “revenge,” and “hate” result in violent, tragic, but limited destruction. We have raised the ante until everything is at stake. Evolution cannot keep up with our passion to invent new ways to possess, rule, or destroy. We have changed the world, but not ourselves. How are we supposed to use ancient attitudes to solve contemporary problems? You can't teach an old dogma new tricks. Our patterns of behavior didn't evolve to deal with life in a teeming metropolis or with weapons of mass destruction. But that is why love means so much to us. As Konrad Lorenz has pointed out, only truly aggressive species would need to evolve love. Our violent nature is what makes love possible. Totally peaceful creatures would not need the balm of love.

Glance in the mirror, and a predator stares back at you. Prey animals—antelopes, horses, cows, deer—have eyes located at the sides of the head, so that they can watch for danger creeping up behind them. In contrast, a tiger has eyes facing front, so that it can use its stereo vision to precisely pinpoint the whereabouts of the next meal, run it to the ground, and leap upon its neck or flank with bared teeth. Humans have the eyes of a predator, a tiger's eyes, and that tells us something about our ancient origins. But we also have colossal brainpower. We are not just dangerous, we are ingenious. Without mechanisms for subduing our violent, craven, and predatory appetites, we would have wiped ourselves out, adding our name to the long roll call of extinction. But evolution gave us a powerful peacemaker. Our ability to love has saved us from ourselves.

*Some women I know are thinking of marketing a New-Age Sensitive Guy doll. Pull a string in his back and he says: "You look great without makeup." "Relax, I'll do the dishes." "Have you lost weight?" "Let's just concentrate on your pleasure."
THE EMPEROR’S NEW WOES

Man is no longer king of his domain. He’s now supposed to be an equal partner—and a good listener, too. Blindsided by the escalating emotional demands of marriage, guys wonder how love became a no-win proposition.

BY SEAN ELDER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG MILLER
LAST YEAR I was asked by the editor of a men’s magazine to write a story about intimacy in relationships. His was one of those publications that advise the American man how to flatten his stomach and increase his chest size—that look, in other words, like a lot of women’s magazines. I spoke to the requisite marriage experts: psychologists and sociologists who had stared into the muck of modern male-female relations. Though I tried to steer my sources toward simple declarative sentences and do-it-yourself answers, the editor was not happy.

“Couldn’t you just give it to us in bullet points?” he asked. “We want a step-by-step guide on how to be emotionally intimate with your woman.”

Therein lies a précis of the principal dilemma in marriage today. Men have come to accept—even celebrate—their wives’ careers and paychecks while learning, step-by-step, how to bathe the baby and bast the turkey. But there is no Julia Child-style primer on closeness, no chart with diagrams: Insert A into slot B, and there you go. Intimacy achieved. Let’s go have a cold one.

It would be funny if it weren’t so painful. “It’s probably the real cause of half of all divorces,” according to Sam Margulies, a divorce mediator in Greensboro, North Carolina, and author of several books on the subject of marital breakdowns. The changes in women’s lives—their roles, ambitions, opportunities—have been considered from every angle. But men’s lives have changed too, in ways that are more confusing, more contradictory and often less welcome. Men did not ask to have their roles redefined. Now, they’re looking for an instruction manual, complete with fine print—and a translator’s guide as well.

“Very few women could compare their lives to their mothers’ and say, ‘We look pretty similar,’” says Steven Nock, a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia who has studied what marriage means to men. “Women have so many dramatically different options in their lives. But where are men taking their cues about what it means to be a husband or a father? There is much less discussion in our society about that.”

The guidelines for being a good husband used to be simple: provide, protect, maybe trim the hedges now and then. Now wives still want all that in a mate—and more. Today’s wife wants a confidante and soul mate as well.

The requirements changed with no warning, and many husbands feel blindsided. Most men were raised with the idea that making it in the outside world is how you score points at home. For many women that also still holds true. It’s not as though they want men to be less goal-oriented or less interested in money. They’re asking for a breadwinner and a best friend.

But the skills needed to be a successful soldier or CEO are literally antithetical to the caring-sharing sort. Success and even heroism are still measured by a man’s ability to compartmentalize, desensitize, act decisively and sacrifice himself. “The essence of masculinity is that what it takes to get love makes us distant from love,” says Warren Farrell, San Diego–based author of Why Men Earn More and Why Men Are the Way They Are. “That is the male dilemma in a nutshell.”

“Men are beside themselves,” Farrell continues. “There is a fundamental contradiction: If [a man] is successful at work, he has really prepared himself to be unsuccessful at home. He’s damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t.”

MARRIAGE CHANGES EVERYTHING. Most men accept that and even welcome the transition. Men recognize that marriage requires compromise and sacrifice—but their beliefs about what’s most important are surprisingly traditional,
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and not necessarily in line with women's beliefs. In his sociological research, Nock followed more than 6,000 young men for decades, gathering data on their social lives, careers and habits. His conclusion is that most men undergo a profound personal transformation when they marry. It is a passage into manhood in an era when the very definition of manhood is in flux. "Marriage changes men because it is the venue in which adult masculinity is developed and sustained," he writes in Marriage in Men's Lives.

A married man works longer hours, moves up the career ladder faster and earns more money than his single peers. He spends more time with his relatives. He donates less to charity; he spends less time hanging out with his buddies and more time in formal social organizations like business and civic associations.

A husband even thinks differently. "The way men view the world and their place in it changes in the act of marrying," says Nock. "Marriage makes people more conventional. If they are religious, they become more devout. They acquire the trappings of property owners, which makes them more conservative. They're less likely to engage in risky or deviant behaviors. Entering into this traditional arrangement has the effect of making men more traditional." A wedding is more than an expression of love; it's a public declaration that a man plans to abide by a set of social expectations about male adulthood. The seriousness with which men approach marriage and the lengths they are willing to go in order to be better husbands are some of the best evidence we have that men take commitment seriously and are willing to do what is expected of them to make marriage work.

But there's a catch. Nock believes that since he conducted his research in the 1990s, women's expectations have expanded to include greater intimacy. While conducting his research, he says, "I was focused more on ordinary expectations." He believes that emotional expectations may now be the most central part of marriage.

"Even a generation ago, if a man was a good breadwinner and he had no profoundly negative attributes, if every night he came home, had a martini and watched TV all night, then went to bed, he was fine," says marriage and family therapist Terry Real, author of How Do I Get Through to You? Closing the Intimacy Gap Between Men and Women. "Now the job description has been expanded to include listening and that least measurable of skills, empathizing. Today, simply not cheating on your wife or beating your kids doesn't make you a good husband and father.

Real says he counsels a lot of men who would prefer the bullet-point version of how-to-achieve-intimacy-now. "I say to them, 'She wants you to be more relationship-skilled than you were raised to be. You're a smart guy—this isn't rocket science.' But for a lot of husbands trying to rise to the demands of their 21st-century wives, the lessons of intimacy are worse than rocket science. They're poetry.

When husbands realize what their wives are asking for, the reaction isn't "I didn't know that you wanted that, too," says Margulies. "It's more like 'I don't understand what the hell you're talking about.'" It's not a question of miscommunication, of Mars and Venus. It's a matter of new specifications, of women wanting something more than a traditional husband who, by definition, was removed and even remote. "In a nutshell, women want their husbands to act like girlfriends," Margulies says.

"I wish it were that simple," says Nock. "I don't think we can say, 'Okay, men, here's what you need to do to become better husbands.'" A lot of men would prefer such clear coordinates—even if it meant acting like a girlfriend.

While the conflicted desires of women have created some of this tension, society sends its own mixed signals. Time and feminism have chipped away at the granite facade of traditional masculinity, but old monuments don't fall easily. The last presidential election, after all, was in part a referendum on what kind of father or husband we want for our country. And did not the simple, stubborn, somewhat unintelligible fellow with the apparently traditional marriage best the more nuanced, flexible, loquacious gent with the strong, independent wife? John Kerry was chastised for windsurfing on Nantucket while George Bush was off whacking weeds in the hot Texas sun.

"What's so ludicrous about windsurfing?" asks Real. "It's effete—which is another way of saying it's feminine. Yet guys are forced to contend with such inane stereotypes. (Have you ever tried windsurfing? It's about as easy as riding a shark.)

Worst of all, women are often complicit in the stereotyping. If a single woman goes to a party, says Farrell, her friends don't push her toward the sensitive schoolteacher—they urge her to chat up the banker. "People don't say, 'Look at that man, he's really listening to a woman, asking her questions and drawing her out,'" says Farrell. "You don't get introductions like that, even though you would be introducing the woman to the type of man who would be a wonderful husband and father. Instead the host will say, 'That fellow is an intern at Mt. Sinai Hospital.'"

So we end up with men wary of the shifting rules of marriage, wondering what's in it for them. The weary white-collar salaryman, having worked his 60-hour week while making time for his daughter's piano recital, may well wonder about the poetry lessons his wife is threatening him with. Suddenly an evening of video games or ESPN doesn't sound so bad, even if it means eating a TV dinner. Hungry-Man meals have gotten a lot better over the
For men, actual physical proximity is often as good as intimacy (“I’m here, aren’t I?”), while women want something more demonstrative.

For the most part, our parents and grandparents did not worry much about the emotional content of marriage. My parents lived through the Great Depression and the second World War. When their marriage ended in divorce in the 1960s, I doubt either of them thought, “If only we had achieved greater intimacy?” It’s not that they were stronger or better than we are today, or that our demands and complaints aren’t legitimate. The lack of emotional connection certainly killed many marriages, and the right to personal fulfillment was part of what drove the women’s movement—which in turn changed marriage for the better.

But on the communication score, most men are still playing catch-up with women. To care about someone else's feelings you have to be in touch with your own, and getting in touch with your feelings is not something we've been raised to think of as essential, or even admirable. Collectively, we don't have a lot of positive examples of an open, questioning, emotional hero. Hamlet, who was certainly introspective, was neither husband nor father; he died, quite conveniently, before facing either of those hurdles.

“It’s not so much that men can't provide the emotional support that women want as that men and women define emotional support differently,” according to Nock. “As marriages become more focused on emotion and happiness, men and women are defining closeness in somewhat different terms.” For men, actual physical proximity is often as good as intimacy (“I’m here, aren’t I?”), while women want something more demonstrative.

Just look at how men and women communicate with members of their own gender. I have seen my wife sit down knee-to-knee with one of her close friends and unload, with no preamble or pretext of doing anything else besides perhaps drinking a glass of wine or cup of tea. Guys, for the most part, need some distraction in order to talk about feelings.

Two summers ago, while visiting some old friends in France (and how is that for effete?), my wife marveled at how my longtime pal Randy and I reconnected after not seeing each other for years. We sat knee-to-knee as well—with our iBooks linked, swapping music files. But what she did not hear was us comparing notes on aging—his mother had passed away, mine was ailing—or our marriages, topics we would not have easily broached otherwise. It’s as though men need something to do with their hands.

Having established that some men are willing to try to meet women halfway, it’s safe to ask what women can do for men. Sex is seriously underrated as a passport to that communicative country a lot of wives want to explore. While some women seem to resent the fact that their husbands want them, and want to be wanted back, the very act (as opposed to talk) allows a lot of men to be more emotionally available. And it, too, gives us something to do with our hands.

“The complaints I hear from men are about their spouses not taking their sexual needs seriously enough,” says Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist in private practice in New York and author of Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life. “Men become vulnerable when they are sexually engaged. Maybe if women didn’t feel demeaned or objectified by male sexuality they wouldn’t have to push it away so much. They could start to feel it as more of a form of communication.” He acknowledges that many women may see it as more work—but isn’t that what they’re asking of their men? Sex is one area where men and women can explore differences without yielding their individual identities. “One thing that has to happen in a couple is that each one has to make room for the other’s desire,” says Epstein, “which is different from the way you experience it. You can approach it but never totally understand it.”

Women can cut men a bit of slack, and try to empathize with these rough creatures (remember Beauty and the Beast?) rather than change them. They can also adjust their expectations. As Farrell says, “If you expect a man to be a killer and be home on time for dinner, you will end up feeling depressed about your partnership.”

After all, men have quickly become masters at another kind of intimacy: fatherhood. Many contemporary fathers feel that they are an upgrade from the previous version. Warm, loving, generous fathers are lionized in the culture rather than scorned, points out Terry Real. “The current generation of men is much better as fathers than their fathers were,” he says, “but it’s not clear to me that we’re much better husbands than our fathers were.” The difference is that much less risk is involved in being vulnerable or intimate with your child than there is with your mate. The relationship of parent and child is not that of equals, and while we may have a lot of expectations of our children, we generally don’t look to them for complete emotional fulfillment.

Truth be known, most men want the same thing from their mates that their wives are looking for in their husbands. They want to be understood by them, even if it means understanding themselves first. There is plenty of evidence that men want and need marriage as much as women do and are willing to learn new dance steps. Just put them in bullet points, and let us lead sometimes. PT

LIKE many considerate boyfriends, Ed Vessel, a cognitive neuroscientist who lives in Brooklyn, bought a toothbrush for his steady girlfriend Diana Adams to keep at his apartment when she sleeps over. While Ms. Adams, a Cornell-educated lawyer, considered this touching, she was less pleased when she noticed the toothbrush that Mr. Vessel had bought for his other steady girlfriend when she slept over.

That Mr. Vessel had a second girlfriend was not the issue. All parties here are committed to polyamory, which for them means maintaining multiple steady relationships, with the knowledge and consent of all involved. The problem was that the other woman’s toothbrush was “a really fancy one that says ‘Primo’ on it, and mine is a junky one that says ‘Duane Reade,’ ” said Ms Adams, 29. For about a month, she was a little miffed every single time she brushed her teeth.

The two eventually talked — polyamory involves a lot of talking — and they now laugh about it. “I just decided that this was an example of a jealousy that is not warranted,” Ms. Adams said.

Polyamory gained a degree of cultural vogue in the sexual revolution of the 1970s, when books like “Open Marriage” made best-seller lists and swingers capitalized on the concept to justify experimentation. But while it failed to survive the era of fern bars for the mainstream population, a small but vocal collection of adherents — many borrowing the language of inclusion used in the gay rights movement — argues that polyamory can be a workable, responsible way to live.
Within the past year, books like “Open,” by Jenny Block, and “Opening Up,” by the sex columnist Tristan Taormino, have argued for polyamory. Celebrities like Tilda Swinton and Carla Sarkozy, the first lady of France, have expressed support for open relationships.

This weekend, a group called Polyamorous NYC, with more than 2,000 members, planned to have a three-day Poly Pride Weekend, featuring a picnic and rally in Central Park.

All this does not mean that polyamory has risen above underground status. Edward O. Laumann, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago and a prominent sex researcher, said many sex studies don’t treat the practice as a category of its own.

Dr. Laumann said polyamorists are probably “just talking like that because they haven’t found somebody special.”

But whether it is a movement, or just something a few couples do, there is little debate that polyamory holds a certain risqué interest for those who would never practice it, and that it can make one’s life very complicated.

Just ask Mr. Vessel and Ms. Adams, who will be attending this weekend’s festival (she serves as the vice president for Polyamorous NYC). As young professionals trying to juggle busy careers with multiple steady romantic partners, their lives provide a window into the freedoms and complications of polyamory.

Toothbrush disputes are the least of it. In the era of safe sex and cellphones, a life that seems to promise boundless sex in fact involves lots of talking. And talking. And talking.

For one thing, they constantly have to explain the way they live.

Ms. Adams, a former Lutheran youth minister, was raised by conservative Christians in upstate New York. She said she was skeptical of monogamy from the time she was a child — “I always had this lurking concern: ‘How am I going to find a man and be married to him for 60 years?’”

Mr. Vessel, 33, seated with Ms. Adams at her Williamsburg apartment, said he thought monogamy “sold something short” — the idea of flexibility — even though he grew up in a supportive nuclear family in Colorado.

Ms. Adams and Mr. Vessel consider themselves bisexuals. He has a boyfriend in Texas he sees a few times a year, and she sees two women regularly.

More than half the polyamorists they know, however, engage exclusively in heterosexual relationships. (Straight or bisexual, there are limits to how open some polyamorists feel; Mr. Vessel and Ms. Adams were the only two of the partners involved who would be identified by name.)

Ms. Adams chose this course five years ago, learning about it through a polyamorous married couple (she soon dated the husband). Mr. Vessel came to it a year and a half ago, hearing about it from a friend. The two met at a cocktail party, and Mr. Vessel said he was struck by Ms. Adam’s ability to, well, talk.
Communication skills are handy, as basic scheduling requires most parties to coordinate their plans on a shared Google Calendar page.

Mr. Vessel typically sees each girlfriend two or three nights a week, which means he keeps an overnight bag packed because he is often away for four or five nights consecutively. This can cause emotional confusion. “When you haven’t seen your partner for four or five days, it can be hard to re-establish a connection,” he said.

And with all that running around, this lifestyle is not always about boundless sex. The two said that rules become more important because of the emotional and health hazards involved in having multiple partners. All parties are expected to give full disclosure about whom they are seeing and what they are doing.

Partners, particularly the so-called primary partners, also carry veto power over their partners’ new prospects. Last year, Ms. Adams exercised them when Mr. Vessel saw a woman who both concluded was trying to pit one against the other.

Mr. Vessel he didn’t want to believe it. “She was hot,” Ms. Adams said in a stage-whisper, a note of jealousy in her voice.

Indeed, while Mr. Vessel seems largely “immune to jealousy,” Ms. Adams said she is not so lucky. A few weekends ago, she had to rush upstate to see her ailing father. But Mr. Vessel had plans to go to the Jersey Shore with his other girlfriend.

While both found the situation vexing, “the argument is not ‘I want to do that,’ it’s ‘How can I make you feel better about that?’ ” Mr. Vessel said. “ ‘Perhaps I can check in later that night, and give you a call.’ ” (They also arranged for friends to accompany her back home).

And even when partners get things straight between themselves, they still must find a palatable way to present their lifestyle to friends and family. “A lot of the stereotypes I come upon are those of swinging, that we are just being kinky,” she said, even though these partners say swinging is not the point.

SOME men are intrigued, said Ms. Adams’s financier girlfriend, until they consider how it would feel to have their girlfriends run off with other men.

Mr. Vessel said his parents are growing accustomed to the idea, although they had a hard time understanding why, on a recent trip home, he held one girlfriend’s hand while talking about another 1,600 miles away.

And last week, Ms. Adams invited her mother to a rooftop barbecue, where she was introduced to her daughter’s circle of partners. “I had to say, ‘You know how I’m bisexual,’ ” Ms. Adams said. “ ‘Well guess what, I have a girlfriend. In fact, I have two.’ ”

She added: “My mom’s reaction was, ‘If these are people that you love, they’re family to me.’ ”

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/05/fashion/05polyamory.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss