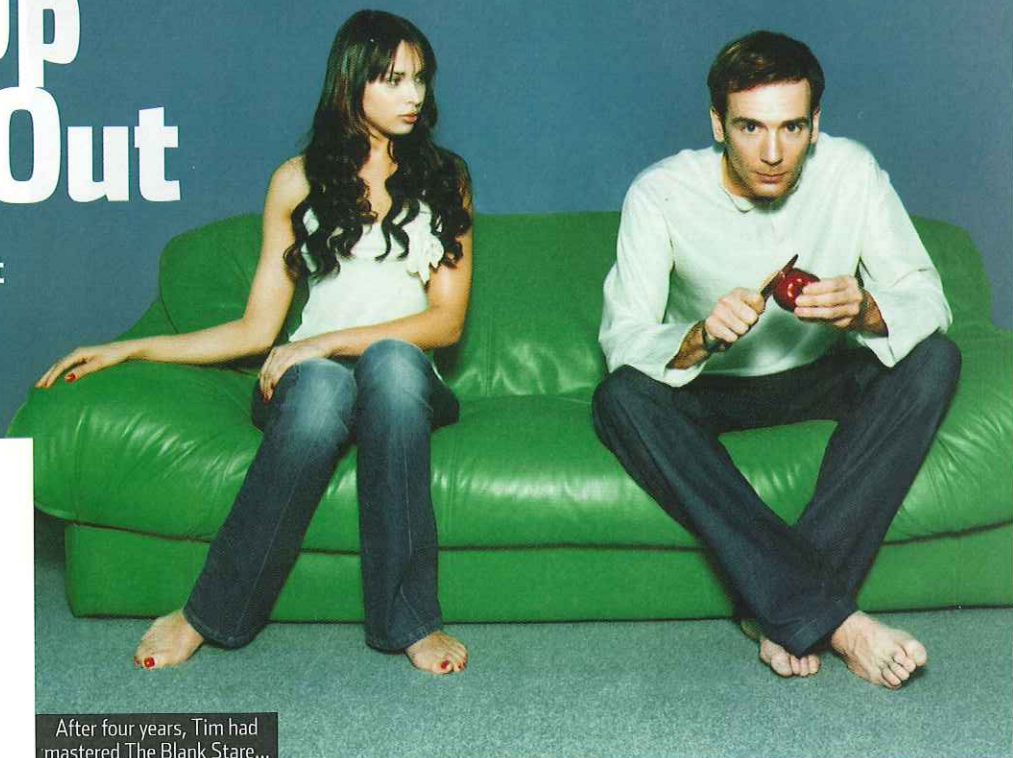


Speak Up or Ship Out

Strong and silent doesn't cut it in coupledness



After four years, Tim had mastered The Blank Stare...

The only thing that will spoil your relationship is lack of communication," crooned the soft-spoken spiritual counsellor, as I lay on her treatment table, absorbing the wisdom and insight she relayed from the angels... or the masters... or wherever she was getting her answers from. I had come to this auric healing, soothsaying expert for direction in Life, the Universe and Everything Else, and until now, all her predictions had been positive. When she hit the communication button, though, I winced. Mainly because I believed her.

We women understand that men are wired differently and function primarily on the "how to solve the problem" adage, as opposed to "how to get closure on the problem". But, if your woman is unhappy with your level of communication, playing ostrich with your head in the sand is not going to help your relationship. She doesn't expect (or want) you to metamorphose into an over-sensitive, moisturised metrosexual, she just wants you to understand the method in her madness.

Cat got your tongue? Here's some user-friendly advice. Take it.

1 MAINTENANCE PLAN

In her book *Divorce Talk*, sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman reports that women cite lack of communication as the main reason for their divorces, while few men identify this as a reason. The first step in bridging the communication gap is knowing there's a problem. You might

be in a relationship for years and not realise she has deep-seated issues. Then, when it breaks down, you wonder what she's talking about. *What, you felt excluded when my friends were around? I never knew!*

Just like I didn't really need to visit a psychic to know that lack of communication could be a problem in my relationship, you don't need a crystal ball to figure out if she's happy. Just ask her. Even if her issues have nothing to do with you, she'll welcome your interest in her feelings and emotional wellbeing.

2 LANGUAGE LABYRINTH

I once heard an apparently proven theory that, while women can talk about 44 different subjects in one sitting, men are limited to four (I presume sex, sport, work and food?). This may be more Velikovsky than Einstein, but it does reflect how women enjoy sifting, mixing, moulding and baking a topic until it's ready to be served and devoured. We only feel satisfied once a topic has been so completely ruminated that every memory or experience associated with it has been expressed, after which the discussion naturally flows onto some other related matter (and even if you think it's

utterly unrelated, trust me, we will have made some sort of connection).

While it's unlikely that you will ever fully grasp this convoluted manner of talking, the least you can do is try not to get irritated when she asks you 101 questions about the shirt you bought. *Where's it from? How much did it cost? Oh, aren't they having a 50 percent sale there? They have that dress I saw in Cosmo, do you think I should buy it? In blue or black? But don't you think blue would bring out my eyes more?*

Although by now you're probably wishing you'd never showed her the shirt in the first place, she'll appreciate it if you humour her. Just for a bit.

3 THE GREAT HORMONE DIVIDE

Why do you think women love gay men (besides the fact that they too can cover 44 different subjects in one lunch hour)? For one, it's because even though they will never physically have a period, they will sometimes jokingly blame their moodiness on PMS. They might not understand what our bodies go through, but they can empathise with our volatility. And contrary to what you may believe, we don't get like this on purpose. I, for one,



don't enjoy having no control over how I'm feeling or expressing myself. Often, while my boyfriend is getting increasingly frustrated at my moods, I'm equally baffled by my own irrational behaviour.

The first rule is: don't ever assume she's got PMS just because she's slamming cupboard doors. There could be a million other reasons. But if you're sure of it, then the best way to communicate with a woman with PMS is in unconditionally calm tones. And no ignoring allowed. It's difficult, I know, but it only lasts a couple of days and she will feel like she has the most understanding boyfriend in the world. Which means day six is your lucky day.

4 SWEET NOTHINGS

Every woman responds differently to communication during sex. Some love you to talk about your fantasies (as long as they involve her), some enjoy it when you compliment each part of her body, others might like you to talk dirty. Read her reaction and be tentative when venturing into new territory. If you realise you've offended her, apologise and explain what your intention was. And don't go there again, unless she gives permission. If you think she's dissatisfied, ask her what she'd like you to do for her. It might take some coaxing to get her to express her innermost desires, but be patient and make her feel comfortable – she really does want to tell you.

5 SPEAKING IN SIGNS

On the website www.thinkingworld.com, Dr John Chaffee explains the different ways men and women use their bodies to communicate. "When women

Women think you aren't listening if you aren't saying anything

speak to each other, they invariably face each other and stay focused on the other's face. Men typically sit at angles to one another, their eyes moving around the room, and only occasionally look at the people they are speaking to. Women also give more listener noise than men, with sounds like 'mhm' and 'unhuh' to show 'I'm with you'. In contrast, men tend to give quiet attention to the person speaking."

Women generally think you aren't listening if you aren't saying anything. So if you're not looking into her eyes, or touching her in some way, try to reassure her that you're following her story so she doesn't have to ask the tedious question: "Are you listening to me?"

6 TALKING TO STRANGERS

The silent treatment has lasted longer than usual. You can't remember the last time she asked you how your day was, let alone if you're in the mood. You know there's something wrong but you don't know what to say to break the tension... or maybe you've just stopped caring enough to ask. This time you probably need to talk to an objective party. A young married couple I know started seeing therapists separately after

the woman found out that her husband was on the brink of an affair. Instead of couples counselling, they decided to work through their own personal problems with an outside person, and then share their individual progress with each other. In this way they were able to look at their independent lives and understand how outside factors were affecting their connection with each other.

Cape Town-based counsellor and life coach Marianna Meyer explains why this is beneficial: "In relationships, we tend to think the person we're with must be what we want them to be. But relationships have a dynamic that is directly connected to ourselves and have more to do with our own thoughts and feelings than the other person, even though this fact is not always obvious." Therapy can help you uncover these factors within yourself, and talking about your sessions with your partner will help you to understand each other and redefine your relationship.

As for my own, slightly more transcendental counselling session, I realise in retrospect that the therapist could have been directing her communication comment at anyone – or any woman, rather – regardless of circumstance. Because the one common complaint among my friends and I is that we can't communicate effectively with our men.

And by this I don't mean that we are in constant conflict, or can't agree on whether to buy the traditional black bin bags (which I insist are stronger), or the more modern white ones (which he says fit the bin properly and therefore aren't as wasteful). I'm referring to the in-depth sort of conversation that extends into forgotten hours and covers every important and trivial topic from "is The Bible Code for real?" to "what's your favourite colour... and why?". The type that leaves you fulfilled, uplifted, inspired and ultimately feeling closer to that person.

But in case you were wondering, my relationship has not yet been ruined by lack of communication. Although I've definitely ranted about too many TV-accompanied dinners and raved a bit over The Blank Stare, I'm fortunate to be with a guy who's mastered No's 1, 3, 4 and 5. Not a bad score for someone in "speech therapy". What's your score? **MH**