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.

Complaint Quandaries

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

Joking, Not Jabbing

Women take men too literally, as well, especially when it comes to joking. For example, when Sue got a haircut, Stan tried to play her up saying “You can always tell people who 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 Stan thought he was saying. For men, mock insults imply, “If we can joke about it, it’s not so bad.” Dania, on the other hand, needs to allow that teasing is a way boys and men show affection. 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 in check.

Body-Language Barriers

One of the biggest complaints heard 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 in their gaps in conversation. Women tend to have their heads down when they talk. Men tend to sit at angles; even parallel—like two people 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 best friend, he’d be down on the floor and put planks on a piece of wood. “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 the 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 it,” she said, “I’m going to try to do it.” No one wants to change when they think they’re being told what they are doing is wrong. But if you think of these conversations pitfalls as mental-code differences, somewhere both need adjustment. Then you can find out whether you really are said made with all.