

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Are Women More Emotional? \*

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If you have the traditional view of gender roles, women are seen as emotional while men are not. Is this true?

Although men and women are still bound to traditional gender roles, it is not that one sex is emotional while the other is not. Both sexes express and suppress various feelings. Men typically hold back emotions like sympathy, sadness and distress, while women inhibit their feelings related to anger and sexuality.

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**Although both sexes experience emotions similarly, they differ in *which* emotions they are encouraged to express.**

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Psychologist Virginia O'Leary of Radcliffe College explored these gender differences in emotions. When provoked to anger, both sexes demonstrated the same changes in heart rate and other physiological responses. However, under questioning, men described themselves as angry, while women usually indicated that they felt hurt or sad. Even in viewing victims in accident scenes, men showed no expression, while women indicated sympathy. Again, physiological measures indicated that both sexes were equally affected.

Another psychologist, Leslie Brody from Boston University, also presented men and women with various situations to elicit emotions. To elicit anger, descriptions of betrayal or criticism were presented. Men simply reacted with anger, while women indicated that they felt sad, hurt or disappointed. According to Brody –

*"Although women don't admit to feeling angry as much as do men, they may feel just as angry inside. It's their early training that tells women not to be as open about their anger. And the same is true of men with emotions like sympathy."*

*"Men are about four times more likely to commit acts of violence than are women, while women are about twice as likely to become depressed as men. When men are in conflict, they turn their anger against the other person, while women tend to turn it against themselves by taking the blame."*

These emotions are more likely to be suppressed in social situations, but not when people are more at ease. Asked in a study to reveal an emotionally upsetting secret, men revealed

such secrets as readily as women by either writing journals or talking into a tape recorder. However, men had much more difficulty expressing the same emotions in a face-to-face situation. In terms of our gender role stereotypes, such emotional expression would be considered as "unmanly."

In contrast to men, women have problems in expressing their sexual feelings. In a study of Patricia Morokoff, both men and women individually listened to a tape of an erotic story. Even though physiological vaginal changes indicated arousal, up to 42% of women denied being sexually aroused. Every single man was aware of his sexual arousal. According to Morokoff –

*"Society presents an ambivalent message to women about sex.... One way out of this double bind is a physiological response without awareness of arousal."*

Men and women also differ in the causes they attribute to various emotions in themselves and others, like anger, fear or sadness. As O'Leary sees it –

*"Men are more likely to explain a strong emotion in terms of some impersonal event, something that happened in the situation, while women are more likely to see the cause as something in a personal relationship or the person's mood."*

*"This difference between men and women has the greatest implication for arguments between the sexes. If a couple fight, the man is likely to take an instrumental response – to look for something in the situation to change and make things better. But the woman is likely to read the argument as an index of trouble in the relationship itself and become critical of their relationship."*

With this difference in attribution, it makes women more likely to become depressed than men. In the words of another psychologist –

*"If men fail at something, they tend to attribute it to some external cause, like the challenge being impossible, or not enough support from their boss. For women though, the tendency is to see a failure as due to something about themselves, as the result of personal inadequacy."*

Even with success, the stereotypical gender roles are still evident. Men are more likely to attribute success to their "skill," while women are more likely to see their success as "luck."

Parents still treat their children according to stereotypical gender roles. Even with two-year-olds, mothers talk more with their girls about their feelings than they do with boys. Studies have found that parents still emphasize emotional control more with their sons, while they promote emotional expression with their daughters. Additional research even

shows this when parents tell stories to their children. Parents tend to use more emotional words in stories with girls – but not with the boys.

Parents – if you are dissatisfied with the narrowed emotional range in our stereotyped gender roles – you can do something to change it. Start with your own children.

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\* Adapted from Daniel Coleman's "Sex Roles Reign Powerful as Ever in the Emotions," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1988.