

# The Nature of Men and Women

Men more committed to relationships      column by Richard Driscoll, Ph.D.

Who takes it harder when relationships fail? Anger helps you leave a relationship, while obligation burdens you and holds you back. So the supposedly independent man is more adversely affected when a relationship fails than is the supposedly dependent woman. Research concludes that men are more deeply hurt by separations than women. Men tend to cling longer to dying relationships,<sup>1</sup> and they fantasize longer about their former spouses after it is over. On average, men take twice as long to recover from failed relationships as do women.<sup>2</sup>

*In short, men get their hearts broken more often than women, and take longer to heal.* Here again, many of us are surprised by the findings. We tend to think of women as being more vulnerable than men. Why do these findings surprise us?

Women express more distress, while men tend to feel more distress but not show it as much. When a relationship is in jeopardy, a woman is more likely to threaten suicide than a man, obligating him stay with her lest he be responsible for her death. Yet three to four times as many men as women actually commit suicide after failed relationships.<sup>3</sup>

The general impression that males are less committed in relationships results from our selective observation. Women talk about it when relationships fail, and those around them see how upset they are. Males usually suffer in silence, and go unnoticed. A jilted woman triggers our sympathies, and we naturally want to support her. When a man gets jilted we figure he did not have the right stuff, and it is hardly a moral concern. In folklore and cinema, the tale of a sweet woman in love with a ruggedly independent man appears more often and is certainly more appealing than a tale of a sweet man in love with a ruggedly independent woman.

It may seem paradoxical that males appear aloof but bond more strongly while females, who seem more openly interested, feel freer to leave. *The sense of being overly committed already makes men wary of further commitment, while women are freer to pursue intimacy because they worry less about being trapped by it.*

The common opinion that women are more emotionally dependent than men shows how nature tricks us. A woman wants a higher level of emotional involvement and is more readily upset when she does not receive it, thereby appearing more dependent. Yet she is more independent, in the important sense that it is easier for her to leave a relationship and go on with her life. A typical man is more emotionally dependent in the important sense that he is less able to leave or to withstand the loss if the woman leaves.

The logic of genetic selection accounts for these perplexing traits. The woman who *appears* dependent obligates her mate to stay and provide for her, thus giving her children an advantage. She makes a man feel responsible for her because she could not make it without him - or so it seems. Yet when it is in her practical interest to leave, her relative independence makes it easier for her to do so than it would be for him. For men, genetic selection works the other way

around. The man who *appears* strong and stable gives a woman confidence that he can support her, thereby increasing his chances of mating with her and producing offspring. Yet the sense of obligation that bonds him to his wife and children leaves him with less real independence than she has. ...

It is indeed ironic that men, who are more interested in casual sex with a variety of partners, nonetheless bond more solidly than do women. In spite of the wanderlust, some combination of obligation, love and emotional neediness holds men more strongly in relationships.

- 1 E.J. Kaninn, K.D. Davidson, and S.R.Scheck, "A Rsearch Note on Male-Female Differentials in the Experience of Heterosexual Love," *Journal of Sex Research*, 1970 ,6, 64-72.
- 2 C. Hill, Z. Rubin and L.A. Peplau, "Breakups Before Marriage: The end of 103 affairs," *Journal of Social Issues*, 1,1976
3. Elaine Walster and G. William Walster, *A New Look at Love* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesly, 1978).

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