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Men and women both struggle to answer new questions

When it comes to American women, men are a gender full of question marks. Ask 10 men to explain what women want or what is expected of men in a relationship today and in response you will get 10 more questions. Ask women what they want and be prepared for various questions, too. In my experience, women can or will do just about anything required, but just because a woman can or must do a thing does not mean she wants to.

My mother went to work and night school to become a nurse after she and my father split up. When I was 7 she decided to move to California to start over. She packed everything in her silver Ford Mustang and drove across the country to work as a nurse. I stayed with my father for six months and finished the school year in Detroit before following her out there. She made the choices that were best for her and her young child, but when asked what she wanted, she says now that she would have preferred to have a husband who made it possible for her to spend more time raising her children.

But it may be impossible for men to know what women want because the question presumes there is a uniform answer. Instead, it appears different women answer the question differently at various points in their lives. There are many women who start a career before their children are born, then choose to stay home for some time while their children are growing up and return to the workplace later. Others choose a career or entrepreneurial endeavor that will allow them to work from home or nearby so they can spend more time with their children. And still other mothers work throughout the lives of their children, balancing work and child care as best they can alongside their husbands and often on their own—because they are single or divorced or because their husbands are unemployed.

This uncertainty is tough for many men to handle—even for those who rely on their women to take care of them and their children. Most men grew up in a world where there were rules to follow. Whether playing football, basketball, or Dungeons and Dragons, the rules were standard and your abilities were the variable. Life was supposed to be the same way. Go to school, do well, get a good job, meet a good woman, and make enough money to raise a family.

But relationships these days are different. The woman you commit to today may have the same name and Social Security number as the woman you are with tomorrow, but she may want completely different things in her life at different times in your life with her. The only remaining rule seems to be: Stay flexible.

In America today, flexibility is almost always an option for women. Technology has mostly liberated women from the constraints of biology. Medicine has reduced the risks of child birth and enabled women to return to active roles more quickly, and advances in birth control have enabled them to have more control over the timing of pregnancy. Without the biological constraints of unplanned pregnancy, nursing, or more dangerous child birth, American women have been able to choose whether or not they want to leave the home and enter the workforce alongside men. Those who chose “yes” forced the doors of education open, enabling women to compete and collaborate with men in the workplace and stand out.

This is not to imply that the playing field is now level. Of course it is not. Women still make less money for the same work, face more harassment, and often have to work harder and be smarter to get the same rewards. The obstacles are important, but just like the situation for African Americans and other minorities, the obstacles have always been there. What is different about today is the greater number of opportunities that exist for women to excel.

For so long the battle was to create this reality. Today many women face a different question. “Now that I know I can compete, do I want to?” It is this choice that has really thrown both genders for a loop. Many of my female friends have had to face questions their grandmothers had not, among them:

- Is my career worth not being there for my children full time?
- Is my career and lifestyle more important to me than having biological children at all?
- How do I respond when another mom from a play group comes up to my child at the grocery store and wonders who I am, because they have only ever seen her with the nanny?

Whew!

On the other hand, my male contemporaries face unexpected questions too. What is a husband who was attracted to the drive of a successful lawyer or businesswoman allowed to say or feel when that professional peer decides to get off the career track and channel her energy into the home front? Conversely, how is he allowed to react when she suddenly decides to go back to work when the kids are still toddlers, expecting him to step it up with child care and home chores without sounding like a misogynist? Or how does he handle the blow to his conception of manhood when he loses his job and she becomes the main breadwinner, expecting him to raise the kids and take care of the house?

Men have been raised with our own expectations, many of them are traditional, but others quite different than our fathers and grandfathers. In addition to my mother, I was raised around very strong women. All of my aunts earned paychecks, as did both of my grandmothers, and each had a very strong influence over their husbands and families. As a child, it never occurred to me that women would not leave home to work.

My parents decided early in my childhood that I would do anything a girl was expected to do. My mother wanted me to be able to take care of myself. If I found a woman willing to take care of me, fine, she would say, but I would never need her to. So I learned to cook, clean, and do laundry. My father, with whom I spent every summer and lived with in high school, required each of his sons to cook dinner one night each week, and Saturday mornings were for thoroughly cleaning the house. Meanwhile, we were still expected to know how to change tires, paint, and do basic plumbing, yard work, and other “manly duties.”

Sometimes we get our ideas from popular culture. For some of my contemporaries, Marian Cunningham, the stay at home mom on “Happy Days” was the model, for others it was the tough-talking working class “Roseanne.” For me it was Claire Huxtable on “The Cosby Show.” Claire was beautiful and in great shape after five kids, without ever going to the gym, rolling her hair at night or putting on eye cream. She was a successful lawyer while making it home every night for dinner, often cooking it herself. Never too tired, Claire was always ready for a romantic evening, even though she worked a full day and had just solved a family crisis. What was there not to love?

If the image of Claire gave some of us unrealistic expectations, Bill Cosby’s Cliff helped prepare us to be partners much different from my grandfathers, who spent many hours in easy chairs watching sports, news, or old movies while my grandmothers, who

worked outside the home, too, cooked and took care of the house. Cliff Huxtable loved to play with the kids and thoughtfully reprimanded them when needed. He kissed his wife in every episode and hugged his children—even the boy. And when Claire came in from work, Cliff always asked her about her day. He was a good dad, playful husband, and thoughtful friend.

The advances women have made are all around us. Hillary Clinton is the third female Secretary of State and almost nobody even raises an eyebrow about men not being alone on that list anymore. Women such as Carly Fiorina, the former chief executive of Hewlett-Packard Co., and her counterparts Meg Whitman at eBay Inc. and Ursula Burns at Xerox Corp. have led Fortune 500 companies. Michele Rhee is chancellor of the Washington, D.C. schools and Shirley Franklin is mayor of Atlanta. Oprah Winfrey is the most successful woman in entertainment and Katie Couric is a network news anchor. Except for the White House, women have reached the pinnacle of nearly every field. There is more work to be done to reach parity, but women are making progress at breaking through the glass ceiling.

Despite these successes, society still has traditional expectations of women. Imagine the sight of an unruly child running alone through the grocery store or a father with a daughter whose hair is not combed neatly. Someone will inevitably ask: Where is her mother?

Despite the sight of all of the dads at the park with their kids on Saturday, pushing strollers down the street, or opening gifts at the now fashionable co-ed baby shower, men still have societal expectations, too. Imagine a family getting out of an old dented car, or five people living in a one-bedroom apartment. Someone will think: Why can't he take better care of his family?

In the end, both genders are trying to figure out how to navigate this new world. We are on new terrain and it means men must be as flexible as the women in our lives. Women have a responsibility also to be clear about what they want and need and give us fair warning when or if that changes. Men are not mind readers and we have expectations of our own based upon the most recent data available. Just keep us posted.

While we celebrate the advances women are making and ponder the conflicts society's changes pose, men and women cannot lose track of the things each of us truly seeks

from our relationships—regardless of the division of labor and which partner is earning the most money. Ideally, most of us want:

- Someone who will be honest about their ideas, expectations, intentions, and frailties
- A safe place to be vulnerable and someone we can trust to be there to help take on the unexpected challenges of life
- A partner who will help raise children with the values that we share
- A faithful lover and friend to explore whatever part of the world we choose together

Recently I was invited to a recommitment ceremony for the grandparents of a friend. At the ceremony the pastor told the story of how they got engaged. A student at Howard University, the gentleman met a lovely young woman who he began to court. After six months he turned to her and asked, “What would you do if I offered you an engagement ring?” She responded, “I would wear it.”

A week later he bought her a ring and she put it on. Needless to say, the gentleman was not well known for his romantic side, but they went on to raise two children, enjoy the adoration of four granddaughters, and spend a fulfilling life together of friends and service to their community.

After 63 years together, the wife was coping with advancing Alzheimer’s disease and her husband was her primary caregiver, choosing her clothes, making her meals, and administering her medication. Knowing that his wife was feeling uncertain about her future and the strain her illness was putting on him, the husband decided to plan the recommitment ceremony. Long ago they had committed to be together in sickness and in health. This was the sickness part and while she was still able to appreciate it he wanted her to know that the love he felt for her 63 years ago was still strong.

In the end, that type of dedication is what most of us—men and women—really look for. With love and commitment, men and women can find the balance of work and family that makes sense for each couple, answering the questions we have and navigating the waters of this new terrain together.