

Is a Woman's Brain Hardwired for Empathy?

Imagine a husband and wife going out to dinner with another married couple. After returning home they discuss the evening and comment about the behavior of their friends. The wife says that she thinks their friends are going to divorce shortly, and the husband stares in amazement and asks her how she knows that.

Her response is *"well it's obvious. Didn't you see the way he looked at her? The way she said..., and then he didn't do ..., and then she responded by looking the other way."* Husband says *"oh, your just overreacting."*

This is **empathy**, the ability understand another person's thoughts and feelings or experience their point of view. It is both intellectual and physical. It's identifying the emotional feeling and then allowing yourself to connect to the other with a shared emotionality. It has always been best stated as **imagine walking in another person's pair of shoes**.



Sometimes empathizing is confused with the female trait of sympathizing where there is the ability to console others in distress and pain (a key quality of mothers with their children).

There is the **biological argument** that the female brain is hard-wired for empathy and a male brain is hardwired for

understanding and building systems. Research scientist Simon Baron-Cohen theorizes the female brain is empathetic because female babies' early ability to establish eye contact, little girls who show more sensitivity to their playmates than boys and women being able to more easily de-code non-verbal communication.

Other studies indicate **women are better at reading facial expressions and detecting lies from vocal tones**. The psychologist David G. Myers reports that when surveyed

- Women describe themselves as being empathetic
- When others are distressed, women are more likely to cry or feel distressed
- Both men and women report enjoying friendships more with women than men
- When looking for empathy and understanding both men and women will turn to other women

The writer, Dyske Suematsu proposes **empathy is actually made up of two parts – ability and capacity**. She agrees with Baron-Cohen that women have greater empathy abilities but ability does not equate to equal capacity. Her premise is that **the capacity for empathy comes from life experience**. Women who exemplify empathy have some form of common experience and therefore more easily resonate to the subtle clues men may miss.

Testing with fMRI (functional magnetic resource imaging) indicates that **empathy comes from the right hemisphere**. When individuals are asked to identify different facial expressions from pre-determined photo images, there is greater electrical activity in the right hemisphere. Also, confirming this are individuals who have suffered damage to the right side of their brain have greater difficulty in identifying facial expressions.

As for women being hard-wired for empathy, the jury is still

out. However, for their empathizing ability to de-code subtle clues of facial expressions or detecting vocal nuances **women appear to generally have the social edge over men.** And, women by their nature of being more relationship oriented may increase their capacity for empathy based on their experiences.

According to Daniel Pink the empathy skill will be one of the important brain skills needed as our culture is moving from its left brain analytical thinking mode to more of the right brain conceptual problem solving mode.

Hard-wired or not, it seems women have a head start.