

When men get flooded:

Have you ever felt that, during conflict, your husband shuts you out and does not listen to you? Have you ever had this feeling that when you begin to complain or give out to him that his eyes start to glaze over? Do you often feel that during disagreements he just begins to erect a wall between you? Well, he may not be quite as bad as he seems.

Psychologists have discovered this process that has been called “Flooding”. Flooding is what happens to a lot of men when they are literally flooded by the emotions and intensity of their partners during conflict. When a man is emotionally flooded he will often begin to shutdown. In the face of his wife’s verbal attacks or emotional intensity he wilts. Though he hears what she is saying, and feels its effects, he often gets overwhelmed. During flooding he becomes quite distressed. His heart rate goes up and his stress hormones start flooding his system. However, though he is internally very distressed, externally he shuts down. Though it looks as if he is not listening to you and that he is shutting you out, in fact he is often engaged in a kind of survival strategy. Because he cannot cope with the emotional flooding he is experiencing, he begins to take flight.

This has been researched and well documented. In fact it has been shown that during verbal arguments a man’s heart rate increases to a faster rate than his partners, and it takes him much longer to recover afterwards. So though it looks as if his wife is the more distressed and overwhelmed through her verbal anger and criticisms, it is often the case that behind his stonewalled face he is actually in a kind of mild panic. So it is not that he stonewalls you because he does not care, he stonewalls you because he is physiologically overwhelmed and needs to escape.

Though you, when you come at him with your complaints, image he is detached and unaffected by anything you say he is often actually deeply affected by what you say. However, he can’t quite cope with the internal distress caused by it. While he sits there staring off into the distance you imagine he is not even hearing you and that you are not getting through to him. The fact is, because he is staring off into the distance you know that you are. Inside it’s as if he is thinking, “Oh God, I can’t cope with this.” “I know she is right but I just don’t know how to respond”, or “Please, let this stop and be over soon”, “I feel terrible and don’t know what to say or do”, “Just five more minutes of this and I will be okay, I just have to hang in there”.

It that he also knows that if he says anything, whatever he says is going to make things worse. He knows he has neither the verbal skills nor emotional intelligence to compete with you, so it’s as if he has to wait for the storm to pass. When he does say something it often just misses the point entirely, like “I don’t know what you are talking about?” or “You are making no sense”, he says these ‘stupid things’ because some part of him just cannot keep up with you. When he is emotionally flooded things do not make sense and he does not know what you are talking about. Research shows that when we are distressed and upset we do not hear things correctly and we are unable to make logical sense of things.

Flooding is a pervasive phenomenon and if it is not recognised then arguments and disagreements get worse. If we stay with the male-female stereotype here, the man who is flooded may march off, withdraw completely, or say something entirely stupid in order to find some sort of escape from their distress. The woman who is flooding or

coming-at the man may read his shutting-down as ignoring her and this may raise the intensity of her 'attacks', thus flooding 'your man' even more. So things get worse. If you are a 'flooder', that is someone who is emotionally and verbally very expressive and fluent, and your partner is a 'floodee', someone who is verbally and emotionally slower, then most arguments will end up in this way. The flooder pursues anxiously and angrily while the 'floodee' withdraws and shutdown in invisible physical distress. This creates the pursuer-distance dynamic so familiar to married couples – where one partner is always pursuing the other for more of everything.

While sometimes withdrawal and stonewalling is exactly what it is, on many occasions it can be flooding. If you and your partner get into these kinds of fights, consider the effects of emotional flooding. Talk about it. Get him to send up a flare when he is getting flooded. You send up a flare when you need to talk.