

Gender Differences Can Cause Problems as Siblings DEal with Their Aged Parents

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

You may have heard how much I talk about the importance of communication between men and women, how more than 60% of relationship problems result from couples not understanding how they use language differently. (For examples of this, see my book, [Why Don't You Understand? A Gender Relationship Dictionary.](#))

Well, this is not only true for couples. It occurs between siblings. Here's an example of a situation that occurred in my office recently.

Michael and Carey, both in their late 40s, meant to be discussing how to take care of their parents who were showing signs of not being able to continue living on their own. They meant to be discussing this, but it ended up they were arguing about it.

Michael, the older (although that may not be relevant when talking about gender differences in language), wanted to check out the assisted living places and then the siblings would take parents to visit the one they thought the best. He was suggesting they not tell the parents what they were doing, and not tell them where they were going until they got in the car.

Carey was totally supportive of the end point – getting parents to look at assisted living places. However, she wanted to discuss it first with parents, let them know what she and Michael were thinking about and why, let them help in selecting the places to visit.

Michael insisted that would only cause complications and it would take much longer. Parents would argue about why they needed to go, they would procrastinate about looking at places – even if they agreed to go. He didn't have the time to waste looking at lots of places with them.

So what started out as a discussion where they were united, ended up in an argument with Carey calling her brother controlling and self-centered and Michael calling her an obstructionist, a bleeding heart, and probably lots more names than either reported to me.

What is really sad was that both siblings were caring about parents, wanted the best of them, invested in helping and invested in working with each other (so many siblings are not willing to do that). They had no idea that each was addressing the issue within their own gender language style.

From within Male-ese, Michael was being direct, setting a goal and heading for it. He was information-focused. He thought there was no need for discussion until options were narrowed.

From within Female-ese, Carey was relationship-focused. She wanted to involve her parents in each step along the way.

The problem is not that either of them was right or wrong; the problem was they were each looking only from their own gender style of communication.

The solution? First they had to understanding where and why they were locking horns. Then, I called the next step by the language that worked best for each: for Michael, it was negotiation; for Carey it was relating together around a task. Looked at it from these different perspectives, Michael could find a way to negotiate a part of what he wanted and some of what she wanted. And, Carey was delighted that they could talk about options.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? But, it really isn't. And, without their seeing how they were butting heads against their natural style of problem solving, they would have kept at it, which would have probably upset parents more – knowing their children were arguing.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

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