

# THE BIGGEST MISTAKE WOMEN MAKE IN RELATIONSHIPS

By Michelle Kelley

**W**omen are excellent and patient listeners. We are natural caregivers and we're supportive of everyone around us. So what is it that we do to mess things up in our relationships? We can't fix it until we know.

You may be reading this because you're in a relationship and feeling frustrated, annoyed and possibly resentful and you can't identify why; you're in a new relationship and you don't want to do anything wrong to derail it or you're looking for a relationship and want to start off on the right foot.

I often hear that women ask for too much. You may even believe that's true – that we tend to be demanding in a relationship or we're “high maintenance” and the perception is that's what sends the relationship down the drain.

Actually, I believe the opposite is more truthful. My 25 plus years of counseling has shown me that women do not ask for enough. Therefore, the biggest mistake women make in their key relationships is not asserting their needs and feelings.

#### **WHY DON'T WOMEN ASK FOR WHAT THEY NEED?**

Women tend to push their own needs aside and focus on taking care of others (especially if we have a partner or children). We have overlearned the skills of accommodating others.

It is easy to give in to the pull of taking care of others to the point of imbalance (especially if you are in the healthcare profession like me). This can



lead to compassion fatigue, a common issue for care takers (professional or not).

Simply stated, compassion fatigue is caring to the point of exhaustion. I have been there (and some days I am still there). Many of my clients show signs of compassion fatigue without realizing why they are feeling so poorly. Some signs of compassion fatigue are increased frustration and irritability, emotional and physical exhaustion or an “I don’t care” attitude.

You cannot change what you are unaware of. Many women are unaware of their patterns of thought and behavior. For example, you may be thinking “I am the only one who can help” or you may find yourself to be the sole caretaker of a loved one when there are others who could help. Maybe you’re asking, but no one is listening. How frustrating!

These powerful messages of care-taking are received from loving family members, friends and even society. You may be acting in a similar way to your mother or grandmother. In other words, this may be learned behavior. Bringing these patterns to your conscious awareness can help to start the change process.

#### **WHAT ARE YOUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS?**

We all have emotional needs and we all need to feel supported, loved, and validated. You may have a need for more help around the house, more quality time with a loved one, more affection or you may need to hear more words of affirmation (I love you, thank you, I appreciate you).

Surprisingly, many women do

not know what their emotional needs are. We were not raised or trained to think of our needs (without feeling selfish). It is up to you to know what your needs are. Some of you may not know, but nevertheless you do have needs. It is your job to learn how to acknowledge and verbalize them.

Some of the benefits of taking care of your emotional needs include: increased happiness, a sense of well-being, improved physical health and happier families. Expect some resistance – both inner and outer. Remember change is usually difficult for everyone – especially this kind of change.

Giving everything you have to your family does not make them happier and it definitely can make you unhappy.

Perhaps “not having needs” is seen as feminine, attractive or strong (to some). Yet this would imply that knowing our heart, speaking our mind and acknowledging our needs is unattractive or somehow selfish. Baloney! Playing into these roles or ignoring our own needs portrays an unrealistic picture of us.

#### **ASK FOR THE CHANGE YOU DESIRE**

Simple, right? Not exactly. This will require knowing what you need, giving yourself permission to ask and then asking (brave step).

Even if you do not get the results you desire, remember that learning to speak up is part of your reward. I often have to teach my clients that the change they are seeking may only be seen on the inside (at first). It is empowering to hear yourself ask for change – even if you can only do this inside your own head.

In asking for your needs to be met, try and be specific. For example, ask for help with dishes, ask for that raise, ask for alone time or time with friends/family. Steer away from asking for more love, support or respect because these things are too vague and open to misinterpretation.

There is no shame in asking. There is only courage. Unspoken needs will suffocate your relationships! You must pump in the oxygen before it’s too late. Oxygen is asking for what you need and speaking out loud your requests. Oxygen is sometimes taking what you need and running with it.

#### **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR FEELINGS**

Your feelings are harbingers. They have messages for you – especially the so-called negative ones. By not recognizing and owning them you may be setting yourself up for trouble. If you keep feeling sadness and you don’t recognize, own and verbalize it – before you know it, it will be called depression.

Asserting your feelings simply means saying “I feel...” hurt, angry, sad, jealous. There are no wrong feelings.

It’s never too late to change, to state how you feel or ask for what you need. I cannot guarantee you will get the change you desire or need, but I can guarantee that you will experience a positive change on the inside. That inner change may lead to other important changes in your life. You will never know unless you do it.

I work with my clients to motivate them toward this change process – toward increased self-awareness, toward greater empowerment, toward

increased happiness. Yes, it may be difficult or seem unnecessary or feel hopeless but don’t give up on yourself. It’s really not about the other person as much as it is about YOU.

My hope for you is to celebrate the small successes, the baby steps, because that is where we all start. Encourage your friends, your daughters and your mothers to do the same. Get the conversation started.

#### **WHAT IF YOU ASK AND THERE IS NO CHANGE?**

You may ask and have disappointing results, but I want you to be very proud of yourself for asking. My suggestion is to be persistent, to validate yourself and to seek support. You always have options in challenging relationships. You deserve to be heard and you have a right to ask for change.

The process of self discovery will allow you to have a deeper understanding of yourself, your relationships, and your life and that is what it’s all about!

#### **THE NEXT GENERATION**

Please know that “care-taking” for women is inherent. It is a beautiful part of who we are. I do not want you to change this. I merely want you to start considering your needs.

This next generation of women is going to be braver, more confident, and more self-aware. They are going to know their needs and have the confidence to ask for what they need (without guilt).

Women are the foundation of families, and family is the foundation of society. We have more to contribute (to everyone) when we are asserting our needs and feelings. ❖

*Michelle Kelley is a licensed counselor and the owner of Girls Stand Strong. She teaches girls and women how to tap into their inner strength to tackle difficult emotions, relationships and life situations. Emotional well-being is as important as physical well-being. Please visit [www.GirlsStandStrong.com](http://www.GirlsStandStrong.com) for more information.*

