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Set limits in opposite-sex friendships

Can a man and a woman be just friends?

This is a very popular question among researchers, and it has been the theme of several movies and TV sitcoms, including "When Harry Met Sally."

Sociologist Diane Felmlee at the University of California-Davis led a study of 406 adults asking that question.

The majority -- 83.5% -- said that yes, men and women can be friends. Just 2% said no, and 12% said maybe. Men and women didn't differ in their views.

Friendships between men and women can work, but these relationships present challenges and are more difficult to maintain.

First, research shows that there are differences in how men and women develop and maintain their friendships. This difference starts very early in childhood. Boys typically engage in rough-and-tumble play in larger groups; girls play games that are cooperative one-on-one.

Women's friendships are built on support and talk; men's focus on shared activities.

"Women are more approving of friends exhibiting crying and hugging than are men -- findings that suggest a greater degree of intimacy within the friendships of females," Felmlee says. Since women's friendships are typically "face-to-face" while those of men are considered to be "side-by-side," these differences can create hurdles for women and men who befriend each other.

Another obstacle to opposite-sex friendships is that a romantic attraction can develop. Although research suggests that men -- more than women -- have difficulty keeping romance out of the friendship or fantasizing about the possibility of a sexual liaison, Felmlee says that in her study "women were more likely than men to report that attraction makes cross-gender friendships difficult."

And others can romanticize the relationship and constantly hassle the two friends to explain or justify the friendship.

Here are some tips to consider if you find yourself in this situation:

- You can gain information about the female or male perspective by asking questions and observing your opposite-sex friend.
- Be very clear about what you want (and do not want) in your cross-sex friendship, given the possibility of adding romance to the friendship. Talk to your friend and set boundaries.
- Your romantic partner needs to feel that he or she is a greater priority and your main confidant; otherwise anger or jealousy can develop.

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