



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## gender issues

**W**omen's and men's emotional and spiritual health are intertwined in deep and complicated ways. This topic is so dear to my heart, so tied to my personal journey and my life work that this is one of the more challenging columns I have ever written. There is just too much to say in far too little space.

My investment in gender issues started around 1972. I was a teacher in my early twenties, living in San Antonio, Texas, when I went to my first NOW meeting—the newly formed National Organization of Women. It was an exciting time. We had consciousness raising groups where we could share experiences and support each other. We felt solidarity with the suffragists who had begun the fight for women's rights 100 years before and for those who had finally won our right to vote in 1920. We wanted to make the world a different place for our daughters.

We had a new sense of freedom! The recently published *Our Bodies Ourselves* gave us information about our bodies that many of our physicians didn't have. Awareness of the prevalence and devastating effect of domestic violence, rape, and incest was growing. Our NOW chapter was involved in setting up a rape crisis center, educating police, and forming self-defense classes. We were making great strides, but I really didn't have a clue about how far we had to go, how hard the journey would be and that I would likely not see the end in my lifetime.

What I lacked back then was an appreciation of the underpinnings of the depth of the problems and how, if progress was to be made, men and women would have to make it together. Until all men are acutely aware of how stereotypical gender roles impair their ability to be whole, men and women will be trapped in a dance that limits everyone.

Our culture still emphasizes beauty and thinness as the most important values for girls and women. Far too many women and young girls have not found their voice. Far too many women are fearful of speaking up in relationships, much less claiming their equality. Emotionally and physically abusive relationships are still

far too common and some men continue to use religious beliefs as grounds for subjugating their wives.

On the other hand, many men are still unable to experience the full range of human emotions. The range of behaviors acceptable for men in this culture is just as limited as for women. The ability to cope with vulnerability, to express sadness, grief, fear, anxiety, and—especially—shame is seen as weakness and is snuffed out in early childhood. Anger, frustration, competition, and the desire for power and control are the emotions that are valued. Power and control are devastating in relationships. Good relationships are built on love and trust.

I am reminded of a quote by cardiologist Dean Ornish: "Love is based on intimacy and intimacy is based on vulnerability." The ability to be vulnerable is the foundation of love and intimacy and, for many, the thought of vulnerability is terrifying. Our inability to face and feel comfortable with our own feelings of vulnerability is one of the biggest impediments to good relationships.

I cannot recommend highly enough that everyone watch the two TED talks available on YouTube by Brene Brown. She is a researcher who has put together in two short, very engaging presentations crucial information about the importance of our being able to come to grips with feelings of vulnerability and shame for our individual and collective healing. Watching and absorbing the information in the videos might just change lives.

Economically, politically, and socially men still hold most of the power and women largely tend to relationships. Our world is out of balance. Women need to be able to own their power and men need to be able to own the depth of the human experience for both to be whole and healed. Only when women take their rightful place as full and equal partners and when men are able to experience the full range of human emotions will we be able to move forward in a way that will enable us not only to develop healthy relationships but to work cooperatively to solve environmental, political and economic problems as well. ❧❧

---

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. [www.stewartpsychologists.com](http://www.stewartpsychologists.com)