

FAMILY

STRESSING THE GENDER GAP

Daniel Freeman found that women are more likely to suffer from psychological problems than men. Kate Whitehead finds out why

It's been 20 years since the release of John Gray's hugely popular book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, a work which fired public debate about gender differences. That discussion shows no signs of slowing down. Wading into the melee is a professor of clinical psychology at Oxford University who has a new take on the debate. Daniel Freeman asks this question: who is likelier to suffer a psychological

problem, men or women? According to his findings, gleaned from a wide spectrum of studies from Europe, the US and Australia, women experience more mental health problems than men – by far. Although Freeman says the answer didn't come as a shock to him, it did seem to surprise the audience at the Asia Society that turned out en masse to hear him speak on March 20. Freeman, whose primary area

of research is delusions and hallucinations, has written a handful of self-help books. His latest book, *The Stressed Sex: Uncovering the Truth About Men, Women and Mental Health*, was co-authored with his brother Jason and will be published in July. "I wrote it because I wanted to find out the answer to that question. It's incredibly important. It's a social issue we should be acting on," he says. He did the research in his free time, and says it was the gap between men and women that took him by surprise: "In the

book, the figure we use is 20 to 40 per cent higher, but it varies depending on which study you're looking at. The German studies suggest it's higher." Giving his first media interview on the book, Freeman was acutely aware of the need for tact in releasing these findings, as they touch on the sensitive issues of mental health and gender differences. He was keen not to lose sight of the disturbing fact that rates of mental illness are very high among both men and women. In any given year, one quarter of the population will experience a psychological problem, he says. If the statistics sound high, it's because

psychological problems are far more common than are generally acknowledged. The reason they are not openly discussed is the stigma attached to them. "It's beginning to change, certainly in the UK, but slowly," he says. "Certainly, in the current economic climate, there are more pressures on men and women, [so] you would be reluctant to admit it in a workplace setting, where you've got concerns about holding onto your job," he says.

The most common psychological problems are anxiety disorders and depression, the two areas where there is the largest discrepancy between men and women. Women are likelier than men to suffer from anxiety disorders, an umbrella term for a range of issues including panic, phobias, compulsive behaviour, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic disorders, and others. These aren't new findings, but what is new, and what is detailed in *The Stressed Sex* is the size of the gender gap. "People are definitely aware, in the academic world, that within disorders there are sexual differences. But no one has done the maths. No one has totalled it up," Freeman says.

The causes of this gender divide? Environment and social pressures. "At a psychological level, there are pressures going on that affect a woman's self-esteem concept that lead to many women having ideas about vulnerability about the self. They can easily get triggered into feeling miserable about themselves," he says. Women tend to internalise their problems while men externalise them. This explains why women are more prone to anxiety and depression, and why men are likelier to have issues related to drugs and alcohol. But this tendency to internalise or externalise is not innate, says Freeman. "Talking about feelings, and dealing with fears and views about yourself involves influences from your environment, from your peers, from your parents, and from the messages you get from the media. But I think there are some differences on a biological level, too," he says.

Society is changing, Freeman points to the increase in heavy drinking by young women, particularly in Britain. "I think what we are seeing in the statistics is that women are catching up with the alcohol problems, but men aren't catching up in anxiety and depression." The way forward, he says, is a greater focus on well-being. A key indicator is sleep. Sleeping problems, such as insomnia, signal an underlying issue. Working to create a good sleep regime will help bolster mental and physical health. Diet is also an important

factor, along with investment in personal relationships. Freeman points to the success of Britain's national mental health campaign "Five a Day", which was launched in 2008. Based on the idea of eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day to stay healthy, the "Five a Day" campaign advocates doing each of these things daily: connecting with other people; being physically active; noticing what's going on around you; learning new skills and about things happening around you; and giving to someone, whether it be a smile, or a random act of kindness.

negative effects when they go wrong, he says. This is most apparent in marriages. "You typically get the woman caring more about relationship issues, childcare issues, and all of that. There are typically more stresses and strains within those realms, and they are realms that are undervalued. Women's work in the home is less rewarded. Women can also get isolated at home. It's incredibly hard work, and they're not being paid for it." Freeman is quick to cite studies that show that if men and women are equally invested in the children and household tasks, then they typically suffer the same amount from problems in that area. "If you're in a good relationship, that's great for your mental health and well-being. But when there's imbalance there, that's in favour of men, and men get more benefits from it," he says.

The really surprising find, says Freeman, isn't that women are likelier to have a psychological problem, but that levels of mental illness among both men and women are so high. When men and women realise that they are not alone with a psychological problem and that mental health issues are very common, then they will begin to feel more at ease about talking about their concerns with friends, family and health professionals, says Freeman.

Many mental health problems, if addressed early, can be resolved without having to resort to medication. Talking is the first step, he says. life@scmp.com

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DANIEL FREEMAN (LEFT), PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

"We know there are some really great psychological treatments for anxiety and depression which can have real benefits. There are clearly things we can do. All the 'Five a Day' things help, as well as improving your sleep and exercise and relationships," says Freeman.

Relationships, when they are going well, benefit both genders, but women are likelier to suffer



Photo: Nora Tam

ROOKIE MUM

Perils and pitfalls of the naming game

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If my husband and I disagree about something, we can usually compromise easily. But we've reached an impasse over baby names. Our second child is due this summer. It took no time at all to name our first, Tom; we agreed as soon as the scan revealed that he was a boy. This time we agreed on a boy's name before we even had a scan. But it turned out that we are expecting a girl, and now we cannot agree.

Every time I suggest a name, he returns to the same one name that he likes. "It's OK, but it's not as nice as 'X'," he says to me, slapping down each new option.

I use "X" because I realise it's a terrible mistake to reveal a child's name to anyone before the baby's actually been born. It's like revealing that you have dodgy bowels – it invites all sorts of unwelcome looks and comments. "Oh, no! I don't like that at all," and "You can't possibly call her that – it's so old fashioned!" are two actual reactions that I've had when mentioning the choices.

Of course, once the baby's named, no one's going to say: "What a dreadful name you've burdened that poor creature with!"

So, what's in a name? After all, that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet. Actually, the name Rose might have been on our list, had not every other girl born in the past three years been named that.

There are many considerations. Does the first name go with the surname? Will it shorten nicely? Does it mean

something terrible in another country? (I think of my cousin Fanny.) Will the child's initials spell something rude?

"Nell," I suggest. "Not on your Nellie! She's an elephant!" my husband counters with some small wit for the early hours of a Monday morning. What's wrong with elephants, I want to know.

According to my husband, my first choice of name is, "OK for a little girl, but too girly for an adult." He has a point, but I love the name. My favourite great aunt was called it, and she was cooler than cool and not at all girly. Unfortunately, my second choice is the name of his late

grandfather's dog. He cannot say it without conjuring up the image of a small boisterous terrier. I point out that he loved that dog dearly and that there are worse things in life than being small and boisterous.

Choice three is the name of a lioness. (I have a penchant for books and films about animals.) He likes this name ("though not as much as X"), so I am gaining some ground. Choice No 4 is "X".

I like his choice, but not enough to settle for it without discussion. It is my fourth choice, after all.

An old university friend of mine and his wife took 10 days after the birth of their daughter to come up with a name. At the time, I thought this was bizarre. How could they not have already chosen one before she was born?

I assumed that when I had children, I'd pick a boy's name and girl's name well before the birth, and that would be that. But I gave no thought to the idea that it's chosen by mutual consent with the father.

My brother and his wife had a boy's name ready for the birth of their first son. But when he arrived, my sister-in-law took one look at him and decided he didn't suit the name. So they had a rethink. This also amazed me. A baby looks like a baby, right? Small and a bit alien-like. They hardly look human, let alone like a specific name.

We asked Tom, now nearly two years old, what he wanted to call his sister. "Peppa," he said. Peppa is his favourite cartoon pig.

You've got to admit, it does have a certain ring to it.

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CLASS ACTION
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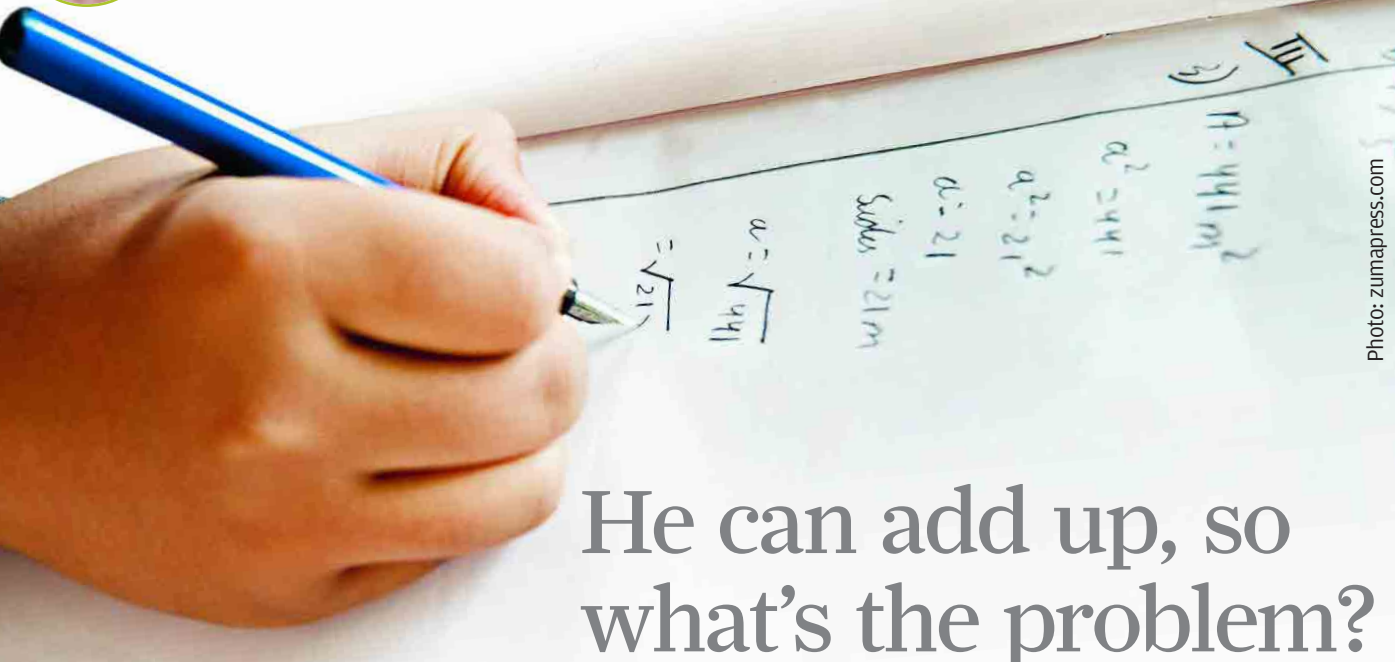


Photo: zumapress.com

He can add up, so what's the problem?

My son's teacher has said he is not good at problem solving, which is ridiculous. He has been in after-school maths programmes for two years and can do all his multiplication tables. He is very good at solving problems rapidly. How can I prove her wrong?

You may be talking about two separate things here. Some children are numerically proficient but can't come up with alternative solutions to a logical problem.

Most of us follow a similar path when solving problems. But there are those who can see other ways around them, and can do it more quickly, too. Schools are trying to enhance this kind of alternate way of thinking.

Analysing a problem carefully to try and understand what is being asked is the key. Teachers may throw in extra information, or red herrings like homonyms, to distract students. This helps them develop the skills to break problems apart and recognise the pieces.

With real-life problems, understanding the underlying issue goes beyond what is being

said. We've all seen people who are angry and act irrationally when trying to deal with a problem. But anger clouds judgement. Good problem solvers keep calm and try to find out what is wrong.

Problem solvers have a sensitivity to people and a strong awareness of logic, as well as the confidence to communicate it effectively.

This is probably well beyond what your teacher is talking about, but it is part of the path they are trying to show your son. Listen carefully to the details, understand what the real problem is, and work towards a positive, fair solution.

Some activities give students practice with working more methodically, finding a step-by-step solution and putting it into practice. Others show them skills and techniques to help them find the core of a problem.

Role play is great for young children, especially if used to learn how to solve playground disputes and how to work together. Understanding how a friend feels when they are not invited to play is made clearer when groups present solutions

in small plays. An additional discussion can help the class see effective solutions.

Drawing a picture or using small toys for role play can make the words more realistic and easier to see.

Sometimes it is hard for a child to understand how he should share his biscuits until you draw them on plates and see how many everyone gets. Creative problems stimulate creative problem solving.

Other times, students need teachers to model ways of working through all the options. Some of this modelling can be part of the teaching which children then can copy and integrate in their own work. Many children come to define

success as coming up with the answer faster than others.

Drilling enables rapid number crunching, and this is needed in some aspects of maths. But it does not help much beyond maths, and that is what your son's teacher is trying to tell you. Work with her on this. Help him develop as a thinker.

Ask him why he thinks someone is acting in a certain way, or why something happened the way it did. Talk to him about the background to a situation, and see if his ideas change. Developing flexibility in thinking goes a long way towards becoming a problem solver.

Help him to see why thinking outside the box is sometimes needed. Be open to talking about how and why things happen so he can see how a small change can lead to a better outcome.

Help him to look at all the elements of a process, and reflect on which are essential, enhancing, or superfluous. As his awareness of a problem deepens, so will his ability to solve it.

Kris Gienger teaches at a Hong Kong international primary school

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