GOOD ADVICE

NEED TO KNOW

BY LINDA MALI

Chris Rock and Gina Torres in a scene from *I Think I Love My Wife* (2007)

ROLL OF DISHONOUR

Can a facial expression – namely eye rolling – predict the end of a relationship? Researchers say it can

If you and your man often roll your eyes at each other in exasperation at something one of you has said, it's time to focus on your relationship before it's destroyed. According to psychologist Dr John Gottman of the University of Washington in the US, if you roll your eyes at a partner's comments it can be a strong indicator of a future break-up or divorce. Body-language experts believe that much communication is nonverbal, and that eye rolling says a great deal.

SHOW SOME RESPECT

'Eye rolling is a passive-aggressive action that displays contempt. Frequent eye rolling can be a sign of larger issues in a relationship and can cause irreparable damage if left unchecked,' says Lauren Clucas, a Johannesburg relationship counsellor.

Gottman agrees expressions that show contempt, no matter how subtly, can destroy a relationship. 'Contempt doesn't have to be expressed openly for it to be hard at work rotting the foundations of your relationship,' he says.

When someone rolls their eyes at you it's also demeaning. It's natural to feel insulted and put down, but Clucas believes that eye rolling says a lot more about the person doing it than the person on the receiving end. 'People who roll their eyes haven't yet developed the skill to communicate their feelings adequately,' she says.

Women have a fundamental need to be heard, understood and respected for their thoughts and ideas, says Mary Ovenstone, a counsellor and executive coach in Cape Town. 'The act of eye rolling is therefore denying you a basic need because it indicates an intolerable level of disrespect. If someone has to put you down in order to communicate their feelings, they are reacting from their own sense of inadequacy,' she says.

BLAME IT ON THE BRAIN

The way men and women register facial expressions is different, according to Ovenstone, who is currently researching behavioural patterns in relationships. A woman is hurt by eye rolling whereas a man may feel threatened and become defensive.

Ovenstone says men are not naturally wired to communicate their feelings verbally. In order to discuss their feelings, they first have to drag the thought to the right hemisphere of the brain, which controls language and emotion. Women, on the other hand, have six to seven cortical centres for language in the brain. This makes it easier for us to talk about how we're feeling. Eye rolling is a secondary response for women but an innate defensive response in the male brain.

GET BACK ON TRACK

It *is* possible to overcome eye rolling and to take steps to bring your relationship back from the brink. 'Eye rolling doesn't necessarily spell the end but it's a clue to how your partner is feeling,' says Clucas. Start by peeling back the layers to get to the root cause of the action. 'When your partner rolls his eyes at you, work backwards from the action to the feeling and finally to the initial thought that caused him to act this way,' says Clucas.

Isolating the problem will show you the way towards dealing with it, says Ovenstone. Avoid blaming yourself. 'Instead of asking, "What did I say that was so wrong?" ask, "How did you feel when I said that?"' she says. 'Realise that this is their problem that they need to address,' she adds.

The greatest gift is to listen to your partner, says Clucas. 'Be emotionally present and don't be reactive. Relationships are about surrendering power. It's not about being right – it's about being understood.' □

PHOTOGRAPHY XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX