

# Gender Differences in Emotional Health

By [Dennis Thompson Jr.](#) | Medically reviewed by [Lindsey Marcellin, MD, MPH](#)

**Researchers argue about why the differences exist, but they agree that men and women are distinct creatures when it comes to emotion. These gender differences can affect emotional health.**

Stereotypes of the way men and women are expected to deal with their emotions pervade our culture and society, easily eliciting images of overly reserved men and excitable, emotional women. Boys are told to suck it up; girls are told to let it all out. But do gender differences actually exist between men and women, and if so, how do they affect our [emotional health](#)?

The research is mixed regarding the emotional differences between the sexes. Strong evidence has been found that there are differences in the way men and women detect, process, and express emotion. Other studies show that men and women share more emotional similarities than differences.

The stereotypes of reserved men and emotional women are widespread and do affect the way young boys and girls are raised. Some researchers argue that we may be ingraining gender differences that do not naturally exist by accepting and passing on these stereotypes to our children. Other researchers believe these differences have developed due to the evolutionary roles placed on men and women to survive and thrive.

While researchers debate these gender differences, they agree that the differences ultimately can have a negative effect on members of both sexes.

## Emotional Women, Emotional Men

Recent research has shown important ways in which men and women react emotionally and perceive emotion in others:

A global study of 55 cultures found that women tend to be more emotional, agreeable, extroverted, and conscientious than men.

Women read other people's emotional reactions better than men, regardless of whether they receive those emotional cues verbally or visually.

Women reported experiencing love and [anger](#) much more intensely than men did in another assessment of gender differences in emotional response. These women also smiled more when recalling memories of happiness or love.

Men and women respond to stress in different ways. Women display greater sadness or [anxiety](#) than men, while men show an increase in blood pressure and a tendency toward alcohol craving.

Women are more inclined than men to experience disgust when exposed to stimuli intended to elicit an emotional reaction.

And those are just studies over the past few years. Decades of research have found numerous differences in the ways men and women interpret emotions and react emotionally. Also, studies have found that gender differences matter more than sexual orientation — a heterosexual woman and a homosexual woman have more in common emotionally than a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man.

Why these differences occur is less easily explained:

Some research has found that the differences may be rooted in cultural stereotypes. For example, women are perceived as being more emotional and behave that way

because it's believed that's what women do, while men express emotion only when the situation warrants it.

Parents may have a hand in promoting these gender differences, expressing disapproval with boys who [cry](#) or express other "weak" emotions while shrugging off similar behavior in girls.

Other studies posit an evolutionary cause for these gender differences in emotion. Men serving as hunter-gatherers needed to take more risks and be more dominating, while women who stayed home and cared for young needed to be more nurturing and cautious. These roles have resisted change as human society has progressed, and indeed, progress may cause these roles to become even more pronounced.

### **How Gender Differences Affect Health**

Gender differences in emotional processing and response have direct consequences on the physical and emotional health of men and women. Overly emotional women tend to be at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders, while men who repress their feelings tend to be at greater risk for physical ailments such as high blood pressure, and also tend to indulge in more risky behavior and vices such as smoking or drinking.

Researchers and doctors have several different proposals for dealing with these differences. Some argue that we should accept these gender differences, based on the fact that feminine women and masculine men tend to be happier than those who are gender-atypical. According to this line of reasoning, boys and girls should be allowed to develop both stereotypical and non-stereotypical emotional responses without judging them or trying to shape them.

Others believe that parents can help dull or negate these stereotypes by refusing to reinforce them. For example, fathers who take a more involved role in child-

rearing tend to raise children who don't fall into the stereotypical sex roles of the stoic male or expressive female.

Whether you're trying to bring up children without gender stereotypes or looking after your own emotional health, be aware of these gender differences and how they affect both men's and women's experiences of the world.