

ASK

Phone

Phone



Phone booths are so 1960. Are your communication skills stuck in the past, too? Actress Nourreen DeWulf will be happy to help you upgrade.

your
way
into
* (or out of)
her
heart

Smart answers to her trickiest questions about love,
sex, and whether that dress makes her look fat

By Laura Roberson Photographs by Sheryl Nields

I



It's 7:30 p.m. You're tearing into a work file on your laptop, a beer on the table next to you and a ball game muted on the TV across the room. Enter your best girl; trailing closely behind her, inevitably, is The Question.

"How was your day?" she asks.

This is a test. Can you engage?

It's not that men don't, won't, or can't talk. In fact, a 2007 University of California at Santa Cruz meta-analysis concluded that men are more talkative than women. Although women take more turns during conversation, men make more statements overall. Men also speak longer and make more suggestions.

Which she really hates.

Here's the problem: Women use language to bond, while men use it like a power tool. "Men are literal communicators," says Audrey Nelson, Ph.D., a gender communication expert. "It serves them well in the business world but often causes them trouble with women."

Learn how to minimize verbal damage, and you'll achieve more-satisfying intercourse—both the social kind . . . and the other kind.

SHE ASKS . . .

"How many women have you been with?"

Right answer

"I've had relationships with different women, but none worth holding on to."

Wrong answer

"Fourteen. And a half. Not counting rounding errors."

What she hears: "Unlike those other women, you're worth holding on to, babe." She hears that even if you don't yet know how you really feel. No woman wants to be a conquest, says Nelson. She wants to know you value her as a partner in and out of the bedroom. "Emphasize

the fact that your past behavior isn't an indication of where you are now," says Sandor Gardos, Ph.D., a sex therapist and founder of mypleasure.com. "You don't have to give her a spreadsheet."

SHE ASKS . . .

"Do I look fat in this?"
(She does.)

Right answer

"It just doesn't do you justice. Wear that black dress you look so sexy in."

Wrong answer

"I wouldn't say fat . . ."

You call it annoying, blatant, and desperate. Psychologists call it "fat talk"—a way women bond with other women, but also a tactic to show that she pays attention to her body, according to a 2010 study in *Body Image*. Take "fat" out of your vocabulary—if you drop that f-bomb, she won't receive the message, says Nelson. "Accentuate the positive instead." No need to point out her muffin top. Just pull out a more flattering outfit and compliment her on the way it plays to her best assets.

SHE ASKS . . .

"Do you think that woman is hot?" (She is.)

Right answer

"She's attractive. What do you think?"

Wrong answer

"In a slutty kind of way."

If your girlfriend springs this question, she knows the woman is sexy. The key is tempering your honesty, says Chris Fariello, Ph.D.,

of the Council for Relationships. That means using mild, nonsexual words, such as "attractive" or "pretty," while avoiding erotic words that tip her off to your own lusty feelings. Then ask for her opinion; suddenly you're paired *Idol* judges, not individual oglers. "You take the focus off the other woman by turning it into a conversation," says Justin Lookadoo, author of *Dateable: Are You? Are They?*

YOU SUSPECT . . .

She's cheating.

Say

"I may be totally off base, but I'm concerned about your relationship with John. Will you be honest with me?"

Don't say

"You're screwing John, aren't you?"

In a *College Student Journal* study, 63 percent of men agreed that they'd cheat if they knew their partner wouldn't find out. Only 52 percent of women said the same. You're wired to be suspicious; male jealousy evolved to prevent the unknowing nurturing of another man's child. "Men tend to sling insults when they suspect infidelity," says Todd Shackelford, Ph.D., an evolutionary psychologist at Florida Atlantic University. "It may be an attempt to decrease her sense of value as a mate so she won't look elsewhere." But if you act like a litigation attorney, she'll react defensively and be more likely to hide the truth. Ultimately you need the truth, so proceed in a way that's most likely to lower her defenses so you can coax it out of her. "Present your suspicion not as a fact but as a feeling or concern," says Sheenah Hankin, Ph.D., a psychotherapist and the author of *Complete Confidence*. "You've opened the door for the truth."

Stupid stuff guys say

Trust us, Noreen DeWulf has heard it all

Before you open your mouth, consider this: Any conversation you have with her will likely be shared among a half dozen other women. "My girlfriends know everything about me," says Noreen DeWulf, an actress in the new movie *The Back-up Plan*, due out in April. "They know who texts me, calls me—everything." Here's how to win her and your panel of critics at every stage of the game.

Call off the games

Don't try to make her jealous by flirting with her friends. Men have these strategies to create competition, says DeWulf. "That's a way to meet a lot of women but not the way to continue a conversation." However, if you approach her and sparks don't fly, it's okay to make a polite exit. She won't be offended.

Goof off a little

On the first date, skip the serious stuff. "Don't ask me about work," says DeWulf. "I like silly questions. Ask me my favorite color or why I ordered this drink." It's your energy, personality, and the way you act that will impress her, she says.

Relive your pursuit

"I like it when there's a process, like when you track me down," she says. After a few dates, reminisce about the first time you saw her. And the more details the better—describe what she was wearing or what your initial reaction was. Then tell her how thrilled you are to finally have connected with her.

Be discreet

In the bedroom, feel free to make kinky suggestions—just keep the source of inspiration to yourself. "Don't tell me your buddy tried this or you saw this in porn," DeWulf says. "That's just gross."



SHE ASKS . . .

"Where is this relationship going?" (*The truth: nowhere.*)

Right answer

"I need to be honest. I'm not looking for a serious relationship right now."

Wrong answer

"I think there's some potential here."

The bottom line is, she wants to hear you're committed. And if you're not, she's handing you an invitation to sugarcoat. "You don't want to hurt her feelings, and you probably want her to stick around for sex," says Fariello. "But if you give her fluff, she's going to cling to it." Translation: If you split in 3 weeks, she'll sling "potential" at you like a poison dart. An honest answer lets her make an informed decision—and allows you to gauge her emotional maturity, says Fariello. If she snarls like a she-wolf, you'll know your commitment fears are dead-on.

SHE ASKS . . .

"What do you think about marriage?" (*You're blindsided.*)

Right answer

"These are my reservations, but that doesn't mean I can't resolve them."

Wrong answer

"Well, it's okay for married people."

Relax. Chances are your girlfriend isn't springing a trap—she's just gauging your commitment level. "She needs you to approve of her but also to want to affiliate with her," says

Nelson. Your strategy: Be straightforward but future-oriented, and use "affiliation cues," like nodding your head, smiling, and leaning toward her. These nonverbal signals may trigger the same chemical response in her brain as long-term commitment does, a recent University of California study found. No, it's not as good as bending a knee and proffering a rock, but such signals make her feel more engaged, even if she's not actually being engaged. Then consider inviting her to take a road trip together or to meet your parents—this provides concrete proof you're invested, without the ring.

YOU THINK . . .

Your sex life follows an endless round of same old, same old.

Say

"Would you be willing to try this position? If you don't like it, we can do what we know works."

Don't say

"You be the wheelbarrow, and I'll be the farmer delivering the load."

"Don't just spring a new position on her. Women need time to process," says Jeffrey Bernstein, Ph.D., author of *Why Can't You Read My Mind?* "She wants to feel included." That means planting the idea before you two hit the sheets. During the day, send her a sexy text message, or an e-mail saying you can't wait to see her. This warms her up, pressure-free. Then in the bedroom, emphasize the sexiness, not the success, of your new maneuver. "Be willing to fall flat and laugh," says Gardos. "Say, 'That didn't work,' and then move on." And if you do pull it off, admire her adventurousness—chances are, she'll request a repeat performance.

SHE SAYS . . .

"I love you." (*But you're not entirely ready.*)

Right answer

"I'm not ready to say that yet. But I'm getting there."

Wrong answer

"Thanks."

First off, don't freak out. A recent Baruch College study found that modern technology—text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging—is one reason the phrase is used more freely. That said, you shouldn't disregard her admission. Tell her your feelings are growing, and go ahead, change your relationship status on Facebook. It may sound asinine—okay, it *does* sound asinine—but in a recent Michigan State University study, 20 percent of participants said they didn't consider a relationship "official" until it appeared on Facebook.

YOU THINK . . .

It's over, but she doesn't know it yet.

Say

"I won't be able to give what you deserve."

Don't say

"You knew I wasn't ready to commit."

Nobody enjoys rejection. Take the blame for the relationship deficit, says Les Parrott, Ph.D., founder of RealRelationships.com and author of *L.O.V.E.: Putting Your Love Styles to Work for You*. This softens the blow without giving her false hope for reconciliation. "Explain the breakup in terms of your own values, rather than pointing out what she did wrong," he says. ■