

Full house of all guys is rare deal

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Last week, my husband announced that he wanted to invite six guys over for an old-fashioned poker party. This was a surprise. His idea of entertaining normally leans more toward a cozy dinner for eight, with his wife as chef. What would I think, he asked tentatively, of having a bunch of beer-swilling, cussing, cigar-smoking, gambling guys in our peach-and-white dining room?



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It was a terrific idea. For some time, the lack of male bonding among the fellows we know has concerned me. These men are devoted husbands. On weekends, they play with their wives and their children. They'd never dream of disappearing night after night, to go drinking with buddies. They don't play pool. They don't take off on all-male fishing trips. They prefer to stay close to the hearth.

This is not complaining. It's nice not being married to the human equivalent of an alley cat.

But these men are missing something. Even after years of acquaintance, they barely seem to know each other. If, for one reason or another, they find themselves in a time of personal crisis, they suffer silently. They stand around looking worried and depressed. They do not feel free to call each other up to commiserate. How can they? They have no history. They would not know where to start.

Women friends get together often. We always can find a reason to assemble for lunch or dinner or coffee or an afternoon of hiking. We talk earnestly during these sessions, of husbands and children, of in-laws and work, of the black-tie wedding we will have to attend in the nude unless someone lends us a dress. We indulge in a certain amount of pure gossip, naturally, but we come away feeling renewed and rooted in reality. If there is a problem, we know where to turn.

A need to get together

It seems my husband and his pals have very few of these heart-to-heart chats. There was a time, back in college, when male consciousness-raising was in fashion, and guys got together to reveal their souls. But this has been out of style for some time. When my husband gathers with his friends, it is not to talk, but to steal a few hours for tennis or golf. When he returns from playing two sets on Sunday morning, he hasn't learned anything new about the emotional, financial or intellectual condition of his buddies. He knows only that he and his doubles partner brought their opponents to their knees.

"So what's the story? Are Sarah and John going to get married?" I ask. He shrugs. He's not holding out on me. He just hasn't thought to ask. "You don't expect me to shout personal questions over the net, do you?" he says. His best and oldest pal has been dating the same woman for 12 years, but my husband does not feel that it is his place to inquire about their plans. "That would be intrusive," he says.

"Just tell me when you want to have this party," I told my husband. "I'll make the sandwiches and the guacamole and lay in a big supply of beer and chips." He said he was suspicious of my enthusiasm. If what he'd seen on TV was right, this was not the usual wifely reaction to a prospective evening of poker. He said that he thought that the game might stretch late into the night. It could be raucous. It would keep me up. Not to worry, I said. I'd leave the premises. My friend Lily's husband would be parked at our house, playing cards. I'd head for Lily's, where we'd hash over some major issues and I'd be able to get a good night's sleep. Upon returning home, I expected to find him a little bleary but quite satisfied. I also expected to find the dining room well-aired, and entirely cleared of beer bottles and damp, chewed-on cigars.

"There's only one problem," he said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I don't know how to play poker, and neither does anyone I know."

"Get a book. It's time to learn."