

THE VULNERABILITY OF MEN: SWIMMING UPSTREAM TOWARD INTIMACY

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Traditional masculinity is a social and cultural construct that dictates the way that men are expected to live, act, behave, and feel. This constraint is likely the catalyst for the issues that men experience in expressing emotion and demonstrating emotional needs. Masculinity determines that men should be emotionally and physically strong, stoic, in control of situations (including their emotions), independent, aggressive, and competitive, among numerous other characteristics and traits. Social messages on masculinity are transmitted to males starting at a very early age where a conditioning process ensues they are often inculcated by a male's parents, teachers, other family members, and caregivers who socialized males to avoid crying, to engage in rough play, and to compete with other boys. This socialization is in stark contrast to the manner in which young females are socialized. In societies that foster traditional masculinity, females are encouraged to express emotion, engage in caretaking activities, be a good friend to other females, be cooperative and verbally communicative, and show affection, among other traits. This is likely why females utilize verbal expressions (of emotion and otherwise) more readily than males do, allowing them a healthy outlet to express their feelings. Males and females do not differ in the feelings and emotions they experience as these are normal human tendencies; the difference lies in how boys and girls and men and women have been socialized and conditioned to express emotion.

Traditional masculinity has handicapped men and has contributed to a detrimental cycle where men feel that if they violate masculine norms, they will be stereotyped or ridiculed. They fear that they would be called "female." According to traditional masculinity, being classified as having female characteristics or behaviors is one of the most (or possibly the most) shameful things a man or boy can portray. This presents another problematic aspect of traditional masculinity: the manner in which anything female is considered less, disgraceful, or at least something worth concealing from the outside world. This contributes to how traditional masculine norms condone homophobia and the inappropriate treatment of women or gay women

(or gay men) as being “less than” heterosexual “masculine” men. Much of the underlying factors of homophobia is the belief that if a man wishes to “be like a woman,” he is deserving of discrimination, ridicule, or other forms of maltreatment. This relays the social message that to look like a woman, act like a woman, or be a woman is shameful or, at least, not as good as being a man.

Traditional masculinity further inhibits and adversely affects men by dictating that men cannot be dependent or vulnerable, as this is the role of women. The rejection of dependency and vulnerability leads to men avoiding help-seeking behaviors in many aspects of life, including physical and emotional health (Watkins et al., 2011). The stereotypical idea that men “hate the doctor,” or avoid healthcare appointments/medical treatments largely stems from adherence to traditional masculinity. Men fear healthcare because this form of care threatens their masculine identity. By receiving healthcare, men must admit to needing help. Poor or limited help-seeking behavior puts men at great risk of serious medical and psychological problems as they do not seek preventative care, and by the time they do receive treatment, health problems may have become more severe or even irreversible. Poor help-seeking behaviors also contribute to men resorting to unhealthy and negative ways to cope with health-related problems. Men tend to seek refuge in drugs and/or alcohol more so than women in order to cope with feelings (Markman Geisner et al., 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). This explains why a culturally and socially acceptable practice among males is drinking together at bars or other settings (Emslie et al., 2013; Fairbairn et al., 2015). Men, oftentimes, use the state of being intoxicated as an outlet to be able to express their feelings more freely. Since alcohol may somewhat reduce inhibitions, men can, for at least a short period of time, feel comfortable expressing emotions, while securing a plausible explanation (e.g., “I was drunk”) for the expression of such emotion.

It’s Not the End of the Road: Lessons Learned

Certain emotions are typically considered a universal construct, uninfluenced by factors like the individual’s culture and more to do with psychological, environmental, and neurological influences. However, it does seem to be an exception to cultural influences on emotions with regard to male expression of certain emotions. Research has indicated that men who adhere to traditional masculine culture and values tend to withhold expressing emotion due to the notion that men must be tough and aggressive (Mankowski & Maton, 2010), strong and in control

(Addis & Mahalik, 2003). The values and culture surrounding traditional masculinity also dictate that men should avoid demonstrating vulnerability, and that expressing emotion is often a telltale sign of being vulnerable (Mankowski & Maton, 2010).

The message portrayed by traditional masculinity is often conflicting, as traditional male culture discourages expression of emotion while personal male values often dictate that men should be good economic providers to their family and be good father figures by demonstrating qualities such as sensitivity and emotional presence towards their wives and children (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). This represents a dissonance between the values and culture of men, with men feeling a moral obligation to be good fathers and husbands but, at the same time, feel compelled to follow the traditional male culture of limited emotional expression, creating somewhat of a lose-lose situation for men. On one side, if they adhere to their personal moral values and fulfill their role of being a good father and husband, they must express some emotions, at least to a certain extent, if they are to succeed in these roles. On the other hand, if they are “caught” (either realizing their expression of emotion themselves or caught by another male/males) demonstrating sensitivity and emotion, they risk being ostracized, ridiculed, and/or rejected by other males (or engage in self-judgment). Even worse, they may risk losing their masculine identity and being classified a “female” or “sissy”. According to traditional masculine norms, any expression of femininity is considered taboo.

How do men cope with their conflicting roles and constant confusion and feelings of not being a good enough man/father/husband? All the while, they are inhibited from expressing “feelings” of frustration as a result of this double bind created by their values and culture. What results are often negative coping mechanisms to handle the feelings and frustrations associated with fatherhood, marriage, and masculinity. Positive coping skills such as seeking therapy or talking to someone about their feelings cannot be utilized, as this would involve another infraction of the “rules of masculinity.” Also, many men may not even know how to cope positively and utilize positive coping skills because they have lived the majority of their lives withholding their emotional pain and putting on a strong, stoic, and “in control” façade. This leaves men to cope with misplaced expressions of anger (e.g., verbal and/or physical), alcohol or drug use, misuse or overuse of prescription medication, engaging in high-risk activities to “regain” some sense of perceived lost “manhood,” among other negative coping mechanisms and outlets for their emotions.

Past Experiences and Lack of Role Model Causes Shame/Rejection

It is not uncommon for men to grow up lacking the positive and crucial influence of a father figure and male role model in their lives. Even when men have a father figure who is physically present throughout their upbringing, the father may not be emotionally present to meet the needs of the growing son. Frequently, fathers are unable to be emotionally present due to adherence to traditional masculine norms resulting in the inability to express emotion of love and affection towards their sons. He interacts with his sons in a cold and emotionally distant manner. These fathers may feel that inflicting discipline on their sons is more important than anything else and failing to teach their sons such discipline is doing them a disservice – a value that may have been passed on from their own fathers. They rationalized by calling it “tough love”. They end up being highly critical since they believe that being strict and punitive is what will make their son a “real man” in the long run.

These fathers ended up passing on the traditional masculine belief system to their sons. This cycle has continued in many families for generations and is a strongly ingrained pattern between fathers and sons because even in today’s more progressive society, traditional masculinity is still very much alive across cultures, communities, and families.

Men raised by a traditionally masculine father and who, themselves, live by such norms, carry with them much “emotional baggage” that affects many aspects of their lives (e.g., family, friendships, intimate relationships, career, etc.). The influence of this baggage is ever-present with men not realizing that their personal and emotional struggles stem from their upbringing and their constant striving towards satisfying and upholding the image of a man. Men often feel trapped and unable to remove themselves from the powerful hold that traditional masculinity has on them. Some men expressed awareness that they were raised by a cold, emotionally absent, and critical father and this awareness often made them feel that they want to be different in their treatment of their own son (or children). They may end up over-compensating.

Men often see the errors in the way they were raised, and they want to “do better,” but their values, albeit unhealthy and misguided, are so deeply ingrained that they may opt to forgo expressions of love and emotion. They resort to emotional coldness and “discipline” instead, especially when raising children becomes challenging or stressful. This scenario presents one of the critical roots of shame and guilt experienced by men as they want to be good fathers, but

their traditional masculine values dictate other ways of living, behaving, and interacting with their families.

Men Hope Women Can Be a Catalyst for Them to Change

From an early age, men were made to abide by the unwritten rule that they cannot place any kind of emotional reliance on other men. For example, when a young boy stumbles while running and scratches his hands, he would most likely turn towards his mother for emotional comfort if he has been raised within a traditional masculine belief system. He knows that his father's response would be to discourage him from crying, followed by an explanation of why he must be "tough," independent, and self-reliant; that is, "boys don't cry" (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). While women may also hold and display traditional masculine beliefs and often raise their sons with the corresponding ideals; it is more likely that mothers will be more nurturing, caring, responsive, and emotionally expressive towards their sons. Even women who display traditional masculine beliefs feel that within their belief system, they are "allowed" to be caring and nurturing and provide support to their sons to a certain extent.

Men learn from a young age that when it comes to deriving emotional support, they should steer clear of other men (Bowman, 2009), as being emotional jeopardizes their masculine image and puts them at risk of being ridiculed and even excluded from membership in male groups. However, being emotional around women is considered acceptable. There are few exceptions where men feel they are allowed to turn to other men for emotional support and such circumstances typically involve the consumption of alcohol as a prerequisite to disclosing any emotions (Emslie et al., 2013). Alcohol within the environment of bars and similar settings represent a sort of "free pass" which men allow each other to use in order to "let loose" and be themselves for a period of time (or at least until they are sober). This is where emotions are allowed to be expressed amongst males, including physical expressions such as hugging, verbal expressions (e.g., "I love you, man"), and even crying that would be considered unacceptable in other circumstances.

Men tend to connect better with women, in the emotional sense, because they feel that they can, in essence, be themselves and freely express themselves around women. Actions and behaviors around other men are characterized by a façade that must be maintained in order to appear strong, manly, masculine, and competitive.

When men are able to relax and be themselves around other men, they are then able to experience emotional closeness (Wagner-Raphael et al., 2001); however, this experience with other men is rare and is more often experienced when men are with women.

Men carry an unconscious or, perhaps, subconscious hope that women (e.g., wife, daughter) will be their catalyst for change or their reason for letting go of the heavy emotional burden that traditional masculinity creates in their lives. Women provide the stability and balance that men seek and desire. Relationships with women provide the much-needed relief that men seek. There are great benefits to receiving emotional support from male peer groups; however, the masculine norms that men have been socialized to believe are what interfere with the development of these relationships (Chu, 2005).

Breaking the Cycle

In order for the generational cycle of traditional masculinity to be broken, several core changes must take place such as the education of men regarding the personal and universal detriments of this belief system, individual attitude change, confronting fear of emotions, and willingness to take risks that result from allowing certain emotions to surface. Having been educated on the negative effects of traditional masculinity, men can begin with the understanding of the physical and mental health consequences that are significantly related to stereotypical masculine beliefs. Men's lack of help-seeking behaviors which are fueled by beliefs that they must avoid demonstrating vulnerability and help seeking contributes to the development of chronic illnesses, mental health problems, substance abuse, consistently higher suicide rates, and a lower life expectancy for men, as compared to women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Garfield et al., 2008; Mankowski & Maton, 2010).

Having discovered the benefits of a stable emotional connection, an attitude change on the individual level could also help men to break the cycle of thinking and behavior that are characteristic of traditional masculinity. Men must also empower other men to do the same. This attitude change begins with discouraging any judgment placed on men for enjoying or participating in traditionally "feminine" interests and activities. When a judgment is made on men by their fellow men in the form of bullying, criticism, discrimination, name-calling, homophobia, harassment, and other acts, men will take an even stronger hold onto traditional masculine beliefs in order to gain a sense of safety from marginalization.

Despite social judgment and stereotyping, men must still find the strength and courage to stand against stereotypical masculinity for the benefit of society and their own sons and future generations. It is not only social risks that men will confront, but also personal risk as they delve into exploring thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that have always been assigned to women and which men have been able to stay away from.

To break ties with traditional masculinity, men should allow themselves to be vulnerable and ask for help from others without shame. To truly achieve this, men must commit to living a more honest and genuine life, allowing normal emotions to have a place in their interactions with others.

The more dedication, presence, and commitment each member invests in his relationships, the greater is the satisfaction that will ultimately be derived from the relationship. Men need to accept that, by allowing feelings into their lives, there will be sadness, disappointment, and rejection; but ultimately, a life filled with genuine and meaningful relationships is more gratifying and fulfilling.

Be a Salmon Fish

The analogy of the salmon fish is often used to describe life's journeys that are difficult and involve overcoming obstacles, challenges, failures, and even loss of relationships. These events need to be surpassed with courage in order to reach the life that we envision for ourselves and in order to actualize our true identity. The adult salmon fish embarks on a journey against the current to the river where it was originally born after living in the ocean for several years. The salmon is able to adapt from living in fresh water to surviving in salt water and, subsequently, adapting to fresh water once again. These extreme changes, along with life-threatening risks involved in taking a trip upstream represent a parallel of some of the hardships that we must face in our lifetime when we feel that we are "going against the current."

"Going against the current" in life means that we are willing to question and challenge what we know, and evaluate whether our current life represents what we truly want for ourselves. This questioning process alone takes much courage as it will likely ignite emotions that may be less than pleasant. Fear, doubt, and confusion will ensue and this often discourages many because as human beings, we like predictability as it gives us a sense of safety and

security. If we feel that we are settling for less for ourselves and for our lives, “change” is called for.

“Going against the current” indicates that we are willing to reject belief systems and behaviors that do not promote our personal well-being and true values. When we begin this process, we will, like the salmon fish, confront numerous challenges. Our journey can make others who are afraid to embark on their own quest towards self-discovery uncomfortable. They may attempt to get in our way. These individuals can often be those closest to us; therefore, we must be cautious not to allow the fears, beliefs, and limitations of others to become our own. The journey upstream is not easy; if it were, it would not possess the life-changing qualities that it has. In order for true change to take place, we must be worn down so that we can let go of the superficial things that occupy our thoughts and daily lives and focus on the important experiences in life that will help us build strength and gain experience. Without struggles and hardships, we would likely float through life, unmotivated to make any changes because things would be easy and predictable; our needs would be met and we would have no reason to pursue change or self-improvement. The reason we experience joy and happiness is because we strive to take the trip upstream in order to enjoy better things that await us.

If we want to be like the salmon fish and take the path that we know will be difficult, we must have the courage to say to ourselves that we deserve more and that we want more than the life we are currently leading. We want to find our own answers to what are the true purpose and meaning in life that is, to fearlessly follow our inner desire to live genuinely and follow our calling to develop and grow into our best self.