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What's in a Man?

According to society, being a man is only about a few things: sex, power, anger, and strength. Because of this, any other emotions, especially those regarded as feminine -- sadness, love, elation, depression -- are socially unacceptable for men to feel. The consequences of this are far reaching and cause men to live in a constant cycle of isolation. This toxic masculinity men have to live with every day is far more dangerous than it might appear to be at first, and unless we as individuals start to take action against outdated views of what it means to be a man, the cycle men are trapped in will only feed into itself and continue to worsen multiple facets of our society.

Being a man closes you off to many emotions that every human feels on a day to day basis. For example, if a man were to cry in public, both men and women would look down on him and might feel consciously or subconsciously that he was less of a man for expressing his sadness. This kind of behavior is learned at a very young age and reinforced constantly. Most five or six year old boys already know that crying makes them less of a man, because "big boys don't cry." Growing up, men are taught that we "[have] to be tough, [have] to be strong, [have] to be courageous, dominating," and that "no pain, no emotions...and definitely no fear" are allowed to be shown (Porter). This kind of message is deeply damaging to male gender identity because it locks men out of being able to safely feel half of the emotions we experience all the

time. The notion that men can only feel angry, aggressive, violent, and nothing else is damaging to all members of society. Not only does this attitude isolate the male and cause personal issues, but also ends up harming everyone as a whole because of the way it makes men act.

This culture of hyper-masculinity men are forced into causes them to act aggressively toward everyone constantly. Failing to meet the challenge of another man causes so much public shame that every man is basically forced to try to prove their masculinity or be outcast as “gay,” a “pussy,” or a “faggot” by the men they formerly were associated with. Being labeled as these things is about the worst thing that can happen to a man; if it does happen, he is excluded from his own gender. This means that he will be made fun of at every opportunity, he won’t be allowed to interact with other men in the same way, and he will be looked at as sub-human, or more specifically, a woman.

Due to long standing societal views about men and women, most men look down on women constantly, partly due to this toxic masculinity I’m talking about. Women are viewed as a means to get more power, to appear “cooler” in the eyes of other men that you’re trying so hard to impress in order to fit in. It follows that this outdated view of what it means to be a man harms women as well, because women are almost exclusively seen to be sexual objects to those who abide by societal views of masculinity. In this culture, for a man to be viewed in the same way as a woman would destroy his reputation and social status. Because of this, men constantly have to put on this air of faux masculinity in an attempt to fit in with other men performing the exact same ritual in order to gain approval. This happens because we are afraid that “other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (Kimmel). If this were to happen, it would be akin to being labeled as a woman. Upon

being discovered or outed as not being a “real man” by societies standards, you would be cast out from the rest of the “real men.” This might be the worst thing that could happen as a man because of how often we are told growing up that we have to be this “real man” the media is shoving down our throats. If you can’t be the one thing society has declared paramount and necessary for a good life, then you’re screwed. Men consistently learn that it is not okay to be anything other than violent and dominating, to be anything other than masculine, which helps explain some of our harmful attitudes towards sex.

It’s no surprise that men seek out sex constantly, but many people don’t ever ask why men are constantly trying to have sex. In Steve Bearman’s article “Why Men Are So Obsessed with Sex,” he claims that men pursue sex so aggressively because it “is the one place sensuality seems to be permissible, where we can be gentle with our own bodies and allow ourselves overflowing passion” (Bearman). To men, sex is provided as the ultimate answer to all of their emotional isolation suffered as a result of trying to attain manhood. This emotional isolation is a result of constantly having to hold back any feelings that aren’t deemed masculine by society, which is almost all of them. By constantly shutting down these emotions, we eventually become numb to them almost entirely and don’t even notice when those old feelings are being suppressed. It makes sense that sex would become addicting because of how it makes you feel; “Pleasure and desire, vitality and excitement, seemingly left behind somewhere we can’t even remember, again become imaginable” (Bearman). These are all emotions that men have otherwise been shut out of in every other aspect of life, but that are readily available via sex, which causes men to seek it out almost religiously. This pursuit of sex is damaging to more than just men though -- this kind of toxic, entitled attitude towards sex causes women to be perceived

chiefly as tools for sexual gratification, which in turn directly helps to perpetuate rape culture.

Solving the issues of male isolation would help to mitigate rape culture and fix broken men, but how do we attempt to teach men to unlearn a lifetime of society's backwards masculinity? The idea of a man dominating others, subjugating women, being in charge, being powerful and strong, having sex constantly, yielding to no one, having zero feminine traits, and being violent and ready to fight to prove it no matter the situation has been drilled into men since they could first talk, so how do we deliver the message that their view of masculinity provided by society is incorrect?

The answer is simpler than one might think, and it starts at the individual level. A man's biggest role model is almost always his father, and if not, is another male authority figure, such as a teacher or a coach. If we can start to educate people now on how to raise young children, we can start to end this cycle of toxic masculinity. If boys learn from a young age that it is okay to show their full range of emotions, that crying doesn't make you any less of a man, that sex isn't the holy grail, that it's okay to be sad and to feel and to love, that both genders are allowed to feel the full range of emotions, then they will pass these ideas on to their children as well. If this technique works well enough, and enough people change their standards for what masculinity should mean, then the media and society as a whole will slowly adopt this healthy new view. Everyone can help participate in this change, whether they are a man or a woman.

If you're a man, let your closest friends know that you are there for them, and make sure they know you mean it. Cut through the bullshit of toxic masculinity and have a real conversation with them; if they're a friend worth having, they should reciprocate and be open to being real with you as well. That means sharing emotions that are normally taboo and being open

to talk about anything, even “feminine” feelings. My close friend group, a squad of about six guys I’ve known my whole life, all are down to have real, emotional talks with each other, because they know that having emotions doesn’t make you any less of a man. It’s comforting to know that I have people that really have my back no matter what, even if I’m showing a more vulnerable, emotional side of myself. Don’t be afraid to show affection for your friends, even in public. Talk to your close friends if you feel the need to, and don’t bottle up your emotions in isolation because that will only continue the cycle we are in right now. It might be hard at first, but it is definitely worth it.

A few years ago, during the summer before sophomore year of highschool, one of my close friends was killed in a car crash on the east coast. When I heard about the news, I wasn’t sure how to react; was I supposed to cry, to go mourn in private, to rage against God and turn violent? Instead of any of these, I simply went numb and carried on with life. I wasn’t actively thinking about her death often, but it would always be creeping around in my subconscious, threatening to sour my mood at any moment. Keeping it all bottled in wasn’t even a choice I made, it just kind of happened. I had never dealt with something like this before and didn’t know what to do or who to go to. Eventually, the pressure built up too much and I had a breakdown from the stress and fear and pain that I had previously trapped inside me, but now was bursting out. I remember when I cried for the first time about it, I didn’t stop for hours. I missed a few weeks of school, sitting alone in my room, not wanting anyone or anything near me. After a while my parents got worried and thought something was seriously wrong, which was true. I opened up to them about what had happened and how I was feeling, and I started to feel better slowly. After realizing how much better I felt, I opened up to my close friends as well, and they

were very supportive of me and told me that they had my back no matter what. Personally, I can say that it is hard to break free of the strong, silent type men are forced into, but it is worth it. Being able to live my life without constant fear of having to hide my emotions is liberating.

In the same way that men can be there for each other, women can help in a similar fashion. Let your male friends know that you are there for them and that there is nothing to be ashamed of if they are experiencing feelings of any kind. It may sound dumb to say out loud, but I can personally confirm from my past story that just hearing someone say "It's okay to feel how you are feeling" helps break down the walls surrounding our emotions. If we all do this, we can help men to feel safer to feel all their emotions rather than solely expressing themselves through violence, which will help deal with other issues in society such as rape culture and violent crime.

The most important part of being a man has nothing to do with the emotions you feel or whether or not you show those emotions in public. It has nothing to do with how many women you sleep with, or how tough you act towards other men. To me, being a true man is the same as being a true woman: being a good person. The masculinity present in the media and pop culture -- the aggressive, violent, womanizing, stoic, badass, hard, unfeeling man -- is not anywhere near what it means to really be a man, and until we start to internalize that individually and pass this news onto the next generation, toxic masculinity will not go away.

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