

Men's Issues in Therapy

By Tom Porpiglia, MS, EFT-ADV

What are men's issues in therapy? Why do they exist? How are they dealt with? Are they different from women's issues in therapy? I will delve into these questions and offer facts and opinions to substantiate the contents of this paper. I will draw on my own growth experience, observation of other men and other research in the area.

The last question is probably the easiest to answer first. Are men's issues different from women's issues? The answer is a definitive sometimes, maybe and yes. Men and women have similar and very different issues in therapy. The similar issues exist in the form of abuse: physical, mental, emotional, sexual, and spiritual. The dissimilar issues exist because we are men. We think differently, act differently, develop in a different social direction, and have unique and different experiences in life. Our mothers brought most of us up with little or no involvement with men and therein lays the problem. Our male role models were poor to non-existent. This is not to say that our mothers did not do a good job. They just do not know how to teach boys how to be men (Bly, What Do, 1982)

With the advent of the industrial revolution, our fathers went off to become the major breadwinners of the family. They immersed themselves in their occupations. As this situation expanded, young men lost their "male mothers." The rite-of-passage into man-hood ended. Workaholism usurped tradition and the family. Men no longer went with their mentors to learn what they needed to know to go from being a boy to being a man. Men created a father wound in their sons and the sons created a father wound in their sons ad infinitum. Men lost the connection with other men and with their sons (Bly, What Do, 1982). The pain and damage this has created is immeasurable.

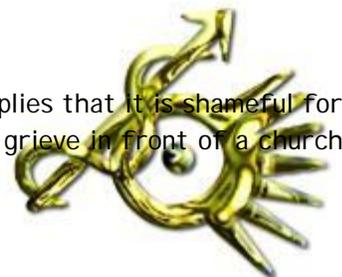
TRUST

When our fathers left us, they betrayed us. When they did not teach us, they betrayed us again. This abandonment generated what I believe to be the largest issue men have today; the inability to trust another man on a very intimate level. How can we learn to trust or be trustworthy when the men we trusted or attempted to trust left us? The answer is we can't. The same is true for trusting other men with our feelings. Because we grew up not learning how to do this, we do not feel comfortable doing it and we won't.

In looking at my own past I realize, as I write this, I did not have a deep level of trust in men. When I started on my journey and was seeking a counselor/therapist, I wanted to work with a woman, not a man. Why? Working with a female therapist felt familiar, safe, and comfortable. After all, I only really knew how to communicate with a woman about my feelings. I did not know how to do this with a man. In fact, the truth is that I did not trust a man with my feelings. At some point, however, a shift occurred and I began to trust and want to work with a male therapist. Major changes occurred when I did this.

SHAME

Our social mores placed a heavy burden on men and their feelings. "Big boys don't cry" implies that it is shameful for men to grieve. My godfather died while I was in Vietnam, and I consciously chose not to grieve in front of a church



full of GIs for this very reason. "Be tough," they tell us. Being tough implies not feeling fear, pain, or joy. It could even imply being angry, aggressive or competitive. Some men can't feel or don't feel, and those that do feel fear if they express their feelings, people around them will shame them, belittle them or call them names. That certainly was a pattern of our childhood and could still be a problem if we choose to share with the wrong person. All of these factors entered into my choice. Reality is this; there is no shame in expressing our feelings.

Homophobia

The Puritans were anti-pleasure people, and their religion had a warped, unhealthy attitude. Their outlook on physical contact was that if you touched someone you wanted to have a sexual encounter with them. Since society and religion severely frown on homosexuality, this turned into do not have physical contact with men, lest they are labeled homosexuals or turn into homosexuals. Ironically, there are societies that openly promote physical non-sexual contact between men. Some of these societies have very strict laws against homosexuality (Colton, 1983). Many of today's Christian religions also frown on physical contact between men; however, it is ok for women (Davis, 1991).

Men need the nurturing of men to heal the father wound. All too often, men turn to women for comfort and healing when it is really male energy that they need (Bly, A Gathering,). However, because of the stigma of shame or the stigma of homophobia or because men do not know better, we do not turn to men for healing. Basically, men have bought into two ideas; 1) physical affection is not for men and 2) physical affection=sex (Davis, 1991)

Grief

How many men cry alone, in private or worse yet, do not cry at all? Men full of grief are walking time bombs waiting to explode into a river of tears, fearing that they will drown in the flood. While we were in Vietnam, my friend Jim would go into the latrine, shut the stall door, and cry. He had privacy and anonymity. I wasn't that creative and 20 years later, I got in touch with the grief about my godfather. It takes a lot of energy to sit on our feelings. Stuffing them does not make them go away. The feelings sit and fester, and surface when we least expect them or want them to. Sitting on feelings drains us of our energy, we may go into depression, and if we sit on one feeling, then we sit on all of them (Lee, 1991).

Robert Bly, noted poet, author, and presenter, believes that grief is the gateway to other feelings. Men must learn to share their grief with others, especially other men. Men need to grieve the loss of their fathers, mentors, and rites of passage. Grieving allows us to say goodbye to that which we lost, and heal our hearts and souls. Grieving lets us get on with our lives and make room for new experiences. Grieving lightens our self-imposed load. I have learned that holding a man allows the healing to occur on a deeper level while he is grieving. Of course, a man who is homophobic will not allow himself the privilege of another man holding and nurturing him. In this situation, the grieving man truly robs himself of a powerful healing opportunity.

Intimacy

Most men believe that intimacy refers to having a sexual relationship with a woman. Certainly, that is one aspect of intimacy. However, that is not the whole issue. Women want intimate communications with men about feelings (Lee, 1991). To most men, intimacy with another man means being part of a team. The team bonds together against a

common enemy (Nowinski, 1993).

Intimacy means sharing our deepest thoughts and feelings with both men and women. If we share our feelings, we can not remain strangers. We will generate emotional connection and a sense of community (Larsen, 1988). This is something most men do not know how to do. It terrifies them, and at times, they unknowingly manipulate women into speaking for them. The social upbringing of men forces us in a competitive, hierarchical direction. Women, on the other hand, grew up in a relational mode. They get encouraged to relate to other individuals rather than compete and develop intimacy with their female friends (Nowinski, 1993).

Men resist intimacy. They fear abandonment if they share their feelings and who they really are. They feel it is unmanly to share their feelings and emotional experiences, so they hold back and do not identify (Nowinski, 1993). There is a paradox here because if they do not share, if they do not open up, they do get abandoned.

NEEDS & FEELINGS

To quote Ernie Larsen, our society "bought a lie." Our society tells us that men don't have feelings (implying a genetic difference), or don't need to feel, and that men should not have needs. Men even deny the need for connectedness. This is a strong, deep need in humans and sometimes the only way men can connect with women is through sex. There is, in fact, no genetic difference between men and women when it comes to needs and feelings. We just bought into the idea; the lie.

Men experience a tremendous amount of stress because of the emotionally restrictive and rigid behaviors taught to men concerning feelings and needs. This stress contributes to shorter lives, relationship problems, a greater propensity to addictions, and other health-related problems for men (Meth, Pasick, ET al, 1990).

THE WOUND

The act of abandoning us created another problem for men too. It left us with a big hole where our father's love should be (Bly, A Gathering). Of course, as children, we were not aware of what happened. We knew something was wrong and we did what we needed to do to survive. As adults, we tried to fill the hole with a myriad of items such as women, money, social status, and other material items, or we did acts to numb ourselves. We go into our heads, drink alcohol, eat, smoke, do drugs, become sexually promiscuous, or perform any other addictive, self-destructive behavior all in the name of filling the emptiness and turning off the pain (Colton, 1983; Nowinski, 1993; Lee, 1991). What we really need to do is feel the pain, grieve about it, be angry about it, learn to love ourselves and get on with our lives. We must fill that hole with ourselves; our own love (Lee, 1991).

Along with the abandonment caused by the industrial revolution, the socialization of men caused a divergence of the sexes and the way in which each get brought up. As noted earlier, women get raised in a relational mode. Men, however, get reared with a positional attitude. Society teaches us to compete, be strong, exercise self-control and emotional restraint, and to base our self-esteem on our relative status and position to another man. When this happened, we lost our ability to identify, communicate, and relate to men and women. What this leads to is chronic insecurity, isolation, and loneliness, which are other aspects of the wound (Nowinski, 1993).

The challenge to men in therapy is to explore and question these roles and constricts (Meth, Pasick, ET al, 1990). What men need to do to overcome all of this is to go down into their feelings, heal the insecurities, heal the wounds, and dispense with the isolation. They need to go into their shadows and acknowledge the parts of themselves they have denied for so long (Nowinski, 1991). Men need to learn to relate to other men and be intimate with them; tell men their deepest, darkest fears and secrets. Easier said than done.

Men need an immense amount of safety to even start thinking about doing any of this. It is scary, no, terrifying stuff to most men. For most men, it takes a crisis or a realization that their life is not working to get them started. They have to be willing to take a long hard look at what they are willing to sacrifice if they refuse to change.

What does safety look like for men? It is an environment of men that is nurturing, non-shaming, trustworthy, honest, non-competitive, not position or status oriented, has boundaries, protection, and loving hardness. It is an environment of men that gently and firmly invites the members of the group to grow, be real, feel, and connect. It is in this type of environment that a man will learn to trust another man, dispense with his shame, feel his grief, anger, and joy, and start taking risks he never thought he would take. He will go into his shadow and tell you what is there. It is an environment that will allow him to heal, become intimate, and to know what it really means to be a man.

The question now is where does a man find such a group of men? There are men's support groups in many of the larger cities. A man simply has to take the time and have the courage to ask around and seek a group. If no group is found, one might consider starting his own. There is an excellent book, [A Circle of Men](#) (Kauth, 1992) to guide men in this process.

My own experience with a mens group has been through the New Warrior, a nation wide training for men. My involvement with these men continues to be an enlightening and healing experience. I have observed the issues discussed in this paper with these men. We challenge the "male mystique," feel and learn to take care of our needs. The support the men provide for each other is wonderful. The connections grow deep. We initiate other men and together we learn what it means to be a man. We are a kernel of change for today's society.

SUMMARY

Men were wounded through the ages by loss of mentors and rites of passage. The loss was created by the industrial revolution. The Victorian socialization of men taught men to grow up and base their identity and self-esteem on positional status compared to other men. Women, on the other hand, were brought up with a relational model and learned to relate to other women rather than compete. This perpetuates the lie that men should not or do not have feelings and needs. It teaches men how to stuff their feelings, live in competition, hide in shame, not communicate their needs, and not trust other men. Our society performs a dis-service to our boys and men.

The challenge of men in society and in therapy today is to create change for the boys and men of the future so they may have a balance in their lives and be able to relate on a feeling level with men and women.

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Tom Porpiglia, founder of Life Script Counseling Services, is a master practitioner of energy therapy. He can be reached at [585-704-0376](tel:585-704-0376), or info@lifescryptcounseling.com or www.lifescryptcounseling.com

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