

Salon

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Toxic masculinity is killing men: The roots of male trauma

The three most destructive words a father or mother can tell their young son? "Be a man"

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"The three most destructive words that every man receives when he's a boy is when he's told to 'be a man,'" — *Joe Ehrmann, [coach and former NFL player](#)*

If we are honest with ourselves, we have long known that masculinity kills men, in ways both myriad and measurable. While social constructions of femininity demand that women be thin, beautiful, accommodating, and some unattainable balance of virginal and fuckable, social constructions of masculinity demand that men constantly prove and re-prove the very fact that they are, well, men.

Both ideas are poisonous and potentially destructive, but statistically speaking, the number of addicted and afflicted men and their comparatively shorter lifespans proves masculinity is actually the more effective killer, getting the job done faster and in greater numbers. Masculinity's death tolls are attributed to its more specific manifestations: alcoholism, workaholism and violence. Even when it does not literally kill, it causes a sort of spiritual death, leaving many men traumatized, dissociated and often unknowingly depressed. (These issues are heightened by race, class, sexuality and other marginalizing factors, but here let's focus on early childhood and adolescent socialization overall.) To quote poet Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, "tis not in death that men die most." And for many men, the process begins long before manhood.

The emotionally damaging "masculinization" of boys starts even before boyhood, in infancy. Psychologist Terry Real, in his 1998 book *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*, highlights numerous studies which find that parents often unconsciously begin projecting a kind of innate "manliness" — and thus, a diminished need for comfort, protection and affection — onto baby boys as young as newborns. This, despite the fact that gendered behaviors are absent in babies; male infants actually behave in ways our society defines as "feminine." As Real explains, "[l]ittle boys and little girls start off... equally emotional, expressive, and dependent, equally desirous of physical affection. At the youngest ages, both boys and girls are more like a stereotypical girl. If any differences exist, little boys are, in fact, slightly more sensitive and expressive than little girls. They cry more easily, seem more easily frustrated, appear more upset when a caregiver leaves the room."

Yet both mothers and fathers imagine inherent sex-related differences between baby girls and boys. Even when researchers controlled for babies' "weight, length, alertness, and strength," parents overwhelmingly reported that baby girls were more delicate and "softer" than baby boys; they imagined baby boys to be bigger and generally "stronger." When a group of 204 adults was shown video of the same baby crying and given differing information about the baby's sex, they judged the "female" baby to be scared, while the "male" baby was described as "angry."

Intuitively, these differences in perception create correlating differences in the kind of parental caregiving newborn boys receive. In the words of the researchers themselves, "it would seem reasonable to assume that a child who is thought to be afraid is held and cuddled more than a child who is thought to be angry." That theory is bolstered by other studies Real cites, which consistently find that "from the moment of birth, boys are spoken to less than girls, comforted less,

nurtured less." To put it bluntly, we begin emotionally shortchanging boys right out of the gate, at the most vulnerable point in their lives.

It's a pattern that continues throughout childhood and into adolescence. Real cites a study that found both mothers and fathers emphasized "achievement and competition in their sons," and taught them to "control their emotions"—another way of saying boys are tacitly instructed to ignore or downplay their emotional needs and wants. Similarly, parents of both sexes are more punitive toward their sons, presumably working under the assumption that boys "can take it." Beverly I. Fagot, the late researcher and author of [The Influence of Sex of Child on Parental Reactions to Toddler Children](#), found that parents gave positive reinforcement to all children when they exhibited "same-sex preferred" behaviors (as opposed to "cross-sex preferred"). Parents who said they "accepted sex equity" nonetheless offered more positive responses to little boys when they played with blocks, and offered negative feedback to girls when they engaged in sporty behavior. And while independent play—away from parents—and "independent accomplishments" were encouraged in boys, girls received more positive feedback when they asked for help. As a rule, these parents were unaware of the active role they played in socializing their children in accordance with gender norms. Fagot notes that all stated they treated sons and daughters the same, without regard to sex, a claim sharply contradicted by study findings.

Undeniably, these kinds of lessons impart deeply damaging messages to both girls and boys, and have lifelong and observable consequences. But whereas, as Terry Real says, "girls are allowed to maintain emotional expressiveness and cultivate connection," boys are not only told they should suppress their emotions, but that their manliness essentially depends on them doing so. Despite its logic-empty premise, our society has fully bought into the notion that the relationship between maleness and masculinity is somehow incidental and precarious, and embraced the myth that "boys must be turned into men...that boys, unlike girls, must achieve masculinity."

Little boys internalize this concept early; when I spoke to Real, he indicated that research suggests they begin to hide their feelings from as young as 3 to 5 years old. "It doesn't mean that they have fewer emotions. But they're already learning the game—that it's not a good idea to express them," Real says. Boys, conventional wisdom holds, are made men not by merely aging into manhood, but through the crushing socialization just described. But Real points out what should be obvious about cisgender boys: "[they] do not need to be turned into males. They are males. Boys do not need to develop their masculinity."

It is impossible to downplay the concurrent influence of images and messages about masculinity embedded in our media. TV shows and movies inform kids—and all of us, really—not so much about who men (and women) are, but who they should be. While much of the scholarship about gender depictions in media has come from feminists deconstructing the endless damaging representations of women, there's been far less research specifically about media-perpetuated constructions of masculinity. But certainly, we all recognize the traits that are valued among men in film, television, videogames, comic books, and more: strength, valor, independence, the ability to provide and protect.

While depictions of men have grown more complicated, nuanced and human over time (we're long past the days of "Father Knows Best" and "Superman" archetypes), certain "masculine" qualities remain valued over others. As Amanda D. Lotz writes in her 2014 book, [Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century](#), though depictions of men in media have become more diverse, "storytelling has nevertheless performed significant ideological work by consistently supporting...male characters it constructs as heroic or admirable, while denigrating others. So although television series may have displayed a range of men and masculinities, they also circumscribed a 'preferred' or 'best' masculinity through attributes that were consistently idealized."

We are all familiar with these recurring characters. They are fearless action heroes; prostitute-fucking psychopaths in *Grand Theft Auto*; shlubby, housework-averse sitcom dads with inexplicably beautiful wives; bumbling stoner twentysomethings who still manage to “nail” the hot girl in the end; and still, the impenetrable Superman. Even sensitive, loveable everyguy Paul Rudd somehow “mans up” before the credits roll in his films. Here, it seems important to mention a National Coalition on Television Violence study which finds that on average, 18-year-old American males have already witnessed some 26,000 murders on television, “almost all of them committed by men.” Couple those numbers with violence in film and other media, and the numbers are likely astronomical.

The result of all this—the early denial of boy’s feelings, and our collective insistence that they follow suit—is that boys are effectively cut off from their feelings and emotions, their deepest and most vulnerable selves. Historian Stephanie Coontz has labeled this effect the “**masculine mystique**.” It leaves little boys, and later, men, emotionally disembodied, afraid to show weakness and often unable to fully access, recognize or cope with their feelings.

In his book, **Why Men Can’t Feel**, Marvin Allen states, “[T]hese messages encourage boys to be competitive, focus on external success, rely on their intellect, withstand physical pain, and repress their vulnerable emotions. When boys violate the code, it is not uncommon for them to be teased, shamed, or ridiculed.” The cliché about men not being in touch with their emotions says nothing about inherent markers of maleness. It instead identifies behavioral outcomes that have been rigorously taught, often by well-meaning parents and society at large. As Terry Real said when I spoke to him, this process of disconnecting boys from their “feminine” —or more accurately, “human”—emotional selves is deeply harmful. “Every step...is injurious,” says Real. “It’s traumatic. It’s traumatic to be forced to abdicate half of your own humanity.”

That trauma makes itself plain in the ways men attempt to sublimate feelings of emotional need and vulnerability. While women tend to

internalize pain, men instead act it out, against themselves and others. As Real told me, women “blame themselves, they feel bad, they know they feel bad, they’d like to get out of it. Boys and men tend to externalize stress. We act it out and often don’t see our part in it. It’s the opposite of self-blame; it’s more like feeling like an angry victim.” The **National Alliance on Mental Illness** states that across race and ethnicity, women are twice as likely to experience depression as men. But Real believes men’s acting-out behaviors primarily serve to mask their depression, which goes largely unrecognized and undiagnosed. Examples of these destructive behaviors range from the societally approved, such as workaholism, to the criminally punishable, such as drug addiction and violence. Men are **twice as likely** as women to suffer from rage disorders. According to the **Centers for Disease Control**, men are more likely to drink to excess than women, leading to “higher rates of alcohol-related deaths and hospitalizations.” (Possibly because men under the influence are also more likely to engage in other risky behaviors, such as “driv[ing] fast or without a safety belt.”) Boys are **more likely** to have used drugs by the age of 12 than girls, which leads to a higher likelihood of drug abuse in men than in women later in life. American men are **more likely** to kill (committing 90.5 percent of all murders) and be killed (comprising 76.8 percent of murder victims). This extends to themselves, according to **studies**: “males take their own lives at nearly four times the rate of females and comprise approximately 80 percent of all suicides.” (Interestingly, suicide attempts among women are estimated to be three to four times higher than that of their male counterparts.) And according to the **Federal Bureau of Prisons**, men make up more than 93 percent of prisoners.

The damaging effects of the aforementioned emotional severing even plays a role in the lifespan gender gap. As Terry Real explains:

“Men’s willingness to downplay weakness and pain is so great that it has been named as a factor in their shorter lifespan. The 10 years of difference in longevity between men and women turns out to have little to do with genes. Men die early because they do not take care of

themselves. Men wait longer to acknowledge that they are sick, take longer to get help, and once they get treatment do not comply with it as well as women do.”

Masculinity is both difficult to achieve and impossible to maintain, a fact that Real notes is evident in the phrase “fragile male ego.” Because men’s self-esteem often rests on so shaky a construct, the effort to preserve it can be all-consuming. Avoiding the shame that’s left when it is peeled away can drive some men to dangerous ends. This is not to absolve people of responsibility for their actions, but it does drive home the forces that underlie and inform behaviors we often attribute solely to individual issues, ignoring their root causes.

James Gilligan, former director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School, has written numerous books on the subject of male violence and its source. In a 2013 [interview with MenAlive](#), a men’s health blog, Gilligan spoke of his study findings, stating, “I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo that ‘loss of face’—no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death.”

Too often, men who are suffering do so alone, believing that revealing their personal pain is tantamount to failing at their masculinity. “As a society, we have more respect for the walking wounded,” Terry Real writes, “those who deny their difficulties, than we have for those who ‘let’ their conditions ‘get to them.’” And yet, the cost, both human and in real dollars, of not recognizing men’s trauma is far greater than attending to those wounds, or avoiding creating them in the first place. It’s critical that we begin taking more seriously what we do to little boys, how we do it, and the high emotional cost exacted by masculinity, which turns emotionally whole little boys into emotionally debilitated adult men.

When masculinity is defined by absence, when it sits, as it does, on the absurd and fallacious idea that the only way to be a man is to not

acknowledge a key part of yourself, the consequences are both vicious and soul crushing. The resulting displacement and dissociation leaves men yet more vulnerable, susceptible, and in need of crutches to help allay the pain created by our demands of manliness. As Terry Real writes, "A depressed woman's internalization of pain weakens her and hampers her capacity for direct communication. A depressed man's tendency to extrude pain...may render him psychologically dangerous."

We have set an unfair and unachievable standard, and in trying to live up to it, many men are slowly killing themselves. We have to move far beyond our outdated ideas of masculinity, and get past our very ideas about what being a man is. We have to start seeing men as innately so, with no need to prove who they are, to themselves or anyone else.