Research by psychologists finds that traditional masculinity—marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression—is, on the whole, harmful.

For the first time ever, APA is releasing guidelines to help psychologists work with men and boys. At first blush, this may seem unnecessary. For decades, psychology focused on men (particularly white men), to the exclusion of all others. And men still dominate professionally and politically: As of 2018, 95.2 percent of chief operating officers at Fortune 500 companies were men. According to a 2017 analysis by Fortune, in 16 of the top companies, 80 percent of all high-ranking executives were male. Meanwhile, the 115th Congress, which began in 2017, was 81 percent male.

But something is amiss for men as well. Men commit 90 percent of homicides in the United States and represent 77 percent of homicide victims. They’re the demographic group most at risk of being victimized by violent crime. They are 3.5 times more likely than women to die by suicide, and their life expectancy is 4.9 years shorter than women’s. Boys are far more likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder than girls, and they face harsher punishments in school—especially boys of color.

APA’s new Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Boys and Men strive to recognize and address these problems in boys and men while remaining sensitive to the field’s androcentric past. Thirteen years in the making, they draw on more than 40 years of research showing that traditional masculinity is psychologically harmful and that socializing boys to suppress their emotions causes damage that echoes both inwardly and outwardly.

APA’s Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Girls and Women were issued in 2007 and, like the guidelines for men and boys, aim to help practitioners assist their patients despite social forces that can harm mental health. Many researchers who study femininity also work on masculinity: Several contributors to the guidelines for girls and women have also contributed to the new guidelines for boys and men.

“Though men benefit from patriarchy, they are also impinged upon by patriarchy,” says Ronald F. Levant, EdD, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Akron and co-editor of the APA volume “The Psychology of Men and Masculinities.” Levant was APA president in 2005 when the guideline-drafting process began and was instrumental in securing funding and support to get the process started.

THE NEEDS OF MEN

Prior to the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s, all psychology was the psychology of men. Most major studies were done only on white men and boys, who stood in as proxies for humans as a whole. Researchers assumed that masculinity and femininity were opposite ends of a spectrum, and “healthy” psychology entailed identifying strongly with the gender roles conferred by a person’s biological sex.

But just as this old psychology left out women and people of color and conformed to gender-role stereotypes, it also failed to take men’s gendered experiences into account. Once psychologists began studying the experiences of women through a gender lens, it became increasingly clear that the study of men needed the same gender-aware approach, says Levant.

The main thrust of the subsequent research is that traditional masculinity—marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression—is, on the whole, harmful. For example, a 2011 study led by...
“Part of what happens is men who are kept secret,” Rabinowitz says. (Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinities). Since 2005, when new guidelines were released, men are more likely to admit vulnerability, says Fredric Leventhal and Rabinowitz launched a continuing-education article offered by APA's Office of CE in 2015, to be tough, and ‘don’t show your hurts.’ And they have to do this in a system where their struggles in ways that are consistent with masculinity,” Liang says. “So, ‘be tough,’” and don’t show your hurts.’ And they have to do this in a system where their behaviors are looked upon more negatively than boys and men from different groups.” These dynamics play out in the prison system as well. As of 2014, black men made up 37 percent of the male state and federal prison population and were more than 10 times as likely to be incarcerated in state or federal prison as white men. Hispanic men were also overrepresented, making up 22 percent of the prison population despite making up only about 8 percent of the general U.S. population. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Gender and sexual minorities, too, must grapple with societal views of masculinity. This is an ever-shifting territory. When Levant and Rabinowitz launched the guideline-drafting process in 2005, only Massachusetts recognized same-sex marriage. Today, transgender issues are at the forefront of the cultural conversation, and there is increased awareness of the diversity of gender identity. “What is gender in the 2010s?” asks Ron McDermott, PhD, a psychologist at the University of South Alabama who also helped draft the men’s guidelines. “It’s no longer just this mal-e-female binary.” Though there is now more flexibility in gender norms than 30 years ago, according to Liang and McDermott, boys and men who identify as gay, bisexual or transgender still face higher-than-average levels of hostility and pressure to conform to masculinity norms. The 2015 National School Climate Survey found that 85 percent of LGBTQ students reported verbal harassment at school over their sexual orientation or gender expression. (GLSEN, 2015). Nonconforming students reported worse treatment than did LGBTQ kids who conformed with traditional gender roles. “The last 10 years have seen a kind of reckoning, he says. And failing to cope with the transition can leave older men vulnerable to depression (Health Services Research, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2008)—an example of how awareness of masculinity ideology can act across the life span. There is a lot of diversity in the experience of men and masculinity, between groups,
within groups and even within an individual," Levan says. “What’s important is to understand that despite all of this diversity, boys and men may experience incredible pressure to live up to these rules around masculinity that they may have learned within their own cultural context.”

CHANGING THE CULTURE

Many of these problems seem intractable—how do you help someone who would never dream of seeking mental health treatment?—but psychologists have a key role to play, as the new guidelines lay out.

First, clinicians must be aware of dominant masculine ideals, and cognizant of their own potential biases. Second, they must recognize the integrated nature of masculinity, and how factors ranging from spirituality to ability to substance use and suicide underscore that they should encourage men to protect their own health. And they should offer services sensitive to the socialization that men have undergone, while fighting against homophobia, transphobia, racial bias and other types of discrimination in institutions such as the criminal justice system.

Some of this involves outreach. Efforts like the National Institute of Mental Health’s “Real Men. Real Depression” campaign can normalize help-seeking by showing tough guys struggling. When men do seek help, clinicians need to be aware that aggression and other externalizing symptoms can mask internalizing problems, Levant says. From early childhood on, boys are encouraged to push down any emotion other than anger, he says, which interrupts boys’ emotional development.

“I tell clients that oftentimes anger is a powerful emotion to cover for a more vulnerable emotion we might feel,” such as sadness or shame, Levant says.

SUPPORTING THE POSITIVE

It’s also important to encourage pro-social aspects of masculinity, says McDermott. In certain circumstances, traits like stoicism and self-sacrifice can be absolutely crucial, he says. But the same tough demeanor that might save a soldier’s life in a war zone can destroy it at home with a romantic partner or child.

“There are times when you need to be able to power through,” McDermott says. “But if you only do that, and you believe that if you don’t do that then you’re somehow less worthy as a person, that’s where you have a problem.”

The clinician’s role, McDermott says, can be to encourage men to discard the harmful ideologies of traditional masculinity (violence, sexism) and find flexibility in the potentially positive aspects (courage, leadership). He and his team are working on a positive-masculinities scale to capture peoples’ adherence to the pro-social traits expected from men, something that has yet to be measured systematically.

One important finding that McDermott and his team point to is that there’s less daylight between what’s expected of men and what’s expected of women than a glimpse at media and culture might reveal. About a third of the traits that people consider to be positive aspects of masculinity, such as sacrificing for others and having strong morals, are actually expected more from women than men when researchers ask both men and women about the traits in isolation from wider gender cues, McDermott says. Other traits, such as community leadership, charm and humor, are expected more of men than women, but not by much. The study focused solely on positive traits, so it’s not clear whether people’s expectations for bad behavior are similarly overlapping (Psychology of Men & Masculinity, online first publication, 2018).

Indeed, when researchers strip away stereotypes and expectations, there isn’t much difference in the basic behaviors of men and women. Time diary studies, for example, find that men enjoy caring for their children as much as women do. And differences in emotional displays between boys and girls are small, according to a 2013 meta-analysis (Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 139, No. 4), and not always in the stereotypical direction. Adolescent boys, for example, actually displayed fewer externalizing emotions such as anger than did adolescent girls.

Getting that message out to men—that they’re adaptable, emotional and capable of engaging fully outside of rigid norms—is what the new guidelines are designed to do. And if psychologists can focus on supporting men in breaking free of masculinity rules that don’t help them, the effects could spread beyond just mental health for men, McDermott says. “If we can change men,” he says, “we can change the world.”

The new guidelines seek to underscore that men are adaptable and emotional.