

Introduction

Masculinities in Transition

Gender roles for men and women worldwide have shifted dramatically in the last half century. Although men in power still hold privileged advantages in commerce, politics, and economic status, the tide has been turning toward gender equality. In the not-so-distant past of the mid-20th century, masculinity was defined by a fairly rigid code. This code included an expectation of male dominance and leadership in most aspects of life, a form of traditional masculinity buttressed by the predominantly patriarchal social forces. Men were assumed to be the primary providers and protectors of the family and community. Often they were oblivious to the power they wielded, especially with those who were not as privileged. Many men enacted these roles with little regard for unintended physical and psychological consequences (Kimmel, 2017). Historically, being a successful man in Western societies included self-reliance, strength, aggressiveness, and emotional stoicism in the face of pain, loss, and life challenges. Women were in charge of child care and the family, whereas men earned the money to provide and protect. Although problematic in countless ways, these gender roles also provided explicit structure for how to act as a man or woman.

A DIFFICULT TRANSITION FOR MEN

The societal shifts that rocked traditional gender roles occurred relatively quickly in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many men, trained to be society's breadwinners, warriors, and protectors, were caught in the cultural undertow as

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Deepening Group Psychotherapy With Men: Stories and Insights for the Journey,

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women entered the workforce and demanded equal rights. Women struggled to break into a male-dominated labor market, but they did so with excitement, promise, and commitment to being included. Many men, on the other hand, were often on the defensive, displaced and confused by their less dominating new roles. To them, it felt as if something had been taken away. The patriarchal power they had taken for granted was being challenged. With women in the workforce, there was new competition for jobs and a new gendered dynamic in work relationships (Kimmel, 2017).

As the nature of work moved away from physical labor to a more technology-based foundation in the later part of the 20th century, education became more important than physical strength. In the current era, women attain degrees beyond high school in higher numbers than men (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Advanced education is now a requirement for many positions, and the shrinking physical labor market, requiring less education, is dependent on fluctuations in the health of the economy.

Although some men are (perhaps unknowingly) working hard to try to maintain the male-led social structure in which they feel most comfortable, the older model of masculine dominance is no longer being supported by society's values and economic engine. Unless men make the shift to a more flexible orientation in terms of control, power, and decision making at work and in relationships with women, they risk dangerous consequences such as crumbling relationships with their partners, high levels of psychological stress, and physical health and life expectancy disparities (Courtenay, 2011). Most recently, men in high positions in the media and corporate world, who thought they might be insulated from the changing rules, have been taken to task for exploiting their power relationships with women (Taub, 2017).

Changing norms in female self-expression and assertiveness have forced men to make an adjustment in their behaviors and expectations around control and power in their relationships. No longer is it acceptable to be abusive and controlling as a way to settle relational issues. Men require better interpersonal conflict skills. Unfortunately, many of the men with whom I have worked over the years have had difficulty shifting toward an egalitarian interpersonal dynamic with women.

Men's stress levels are further symptoms of change. With increased pressure and conflict at work and home, many men have sought refuge from the emotional intensity. Typical escape routes include overindulgence in food, alcohol, drugs, smoking, sex, and even work itself. Because traditional norms do not include men sharing their stress with others, men's psychological symptoms are often masked (Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000). As long as it is "unmanly" to acknowledge anxiety and depression, these conditions eat away at men privately.

Today the rates of health-related medical conditions for men, especially cancers, cardiac problems, and diabetes, are higher in relation to rates for females (Gough & Robertson, 2017). Deaths as a result of violence, as well as

traffic and industrial accidental deaths, occur among men at 3 to 4 times the rate they do among women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Despite a higher reported prevalence of depression for women overall (Bromet et al., 2011; Kessler et al., 2003), the male suicide rate, especially in middle-aged White men, is 4 times that of women in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Phillips, Robin, Nugent, & Idler, 2010). Thus, it seems clear that men do experience depression, but many are not reporting it, nor are they seeking treatment, leading to a higher incidence of suicide than would be expected (Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000; Phillips et al., 2010). Taking into account between-group variance and cross-national data, the average life expectancy for men globally is 5 to 7 years less than for women (Gough & Robertson, 2017).

Of course, many men were also at a disadvantage, even under the old rules. Men of color; gay, transgender, and bisexual men; disabled men; and men who don't fit into the straight White norms portrayed in the media have often been relegated to the shadows of society (Kimmel, 2017). These men have found prejudice and hate at the intersection of their masculine identities. The liberation movements that began in the 1960s and 1970s exposed some of the pent-up frustration of many groups of people, including women; people of color; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals. However, public policies and the structure and output of cultural institutions have been generally slow to transform and often still reflect societal conflict about maintaining the previous socioeconomic and social order.

TURNING THE TIDE

Despite the difficulty of the transition, some men have taken advantage of changing gender expectations to expand their behavioral and emotional repertoires. They have been liberated from the forced roles of traditional masculinity and freed to pursue interests, careers, and relationships that might not fit that model. Their relationship patterns have shifted to include more egalitarian power and division of labor within the family. More fathers are nurturing, supportive, and positive with their children. There is hope in the breakdown of roles that men can live more productive, meaningful, and healthier lives.

By becoming more self-aware, men can make healthier choices about how they live. By questioning the traditional masculine norms, men have a chance to be better, well-rounded people. They can live more cooperatively and with greater concern for others. Being in control or in charge can be one of many ego states rather than the only one that feels comfortable. Competition to do one's best can be internally driven rather than compelled by a fear of inadequacy or a need to feel superior than another person. Ideally, by being more flexible and whole, men might become less aggressive and less needy for external acknowledgment.

Many men are still conflicted about how to handle the changing roles, the churning emotions, and the mixed messages that society gives about being a man. The message conveyed in the United States and other countries, reinforced by certain political groups, professional sports, and the advertising of male-oriented products, is that the “macho” version of manhood is still the best. The admiration of the “winners,” who make large amounts of money, win at sports, or have flawless muscular bodies, is still ever present. Although most men never attain those ideals, many are tortured by the failure to live up to the standards they have internalized. Since childhood, many boys have been taught not to act like “sissies” by their peers on the playground. Although a good number of boys are supported emotionally at home, their entry into the public sphere is rife with competition and jockeying for who best lives up to the masculine ideal of toughness and dominance (Kilmartin & Smiler, 2015).

On an individual level, life is a rough journey regardless of one’s cultural upbringing. There will be universal problems. Parents get divorced. Kids move away from friends. Friends betray each other. Parents and grandparents die or become incapacitated. Some young men will make mistakes and get in trouble with the law. Some will become addicted to alcohol or drugs. Adult men lose their jobs. Some men will search for love and never find it. Others will love, commit, and marry. Most men will experience leaving or being left by someone they love. Men will become fathers of kids who have special needs or difficult lives. Even those men who initially dodge some of life’s dilemmas will be hit with them later in their lives. They will experience physical injury, suffer pain, and contract serious diseases. Eventually all of us will be left to ponder our own mortality and meaning in life. So even if we were perfectly capable of handling all of life’s problems, we would still be impacted psychologically and emotionally by the challenges of the journey.

Under the best of circumstances, most of us would benefit from human support, understanding, and empathy as we make our way through life. Some are fortunate to have this kind of support in their families or communities, but many do not. Most men will tough it out and find a myriad of work-arounds when the unpredictable comes their way. Because asking for help, especially from a therapist or psychologist, is often perceived as shameful, most men never make it to a clinician’s office, where potential supportive assistance is readily available. When they do, it is usually a last resort (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

This book describes a personal approach to working therapeutically with men. It takes into account an individual’s internal dynamics, the influences of culture, and the power of intimate therapeutic connections to deepen a man’s experience of himself and his relationships. As you read, you will be able to witness how various men feel, think, and change as they move through the

Deepening individual and group psychotherapy process. My commentary and questions accompany the journey of each man and his interactions within the group setting. I provide the reader with my reactions, formulations, and reasons for interventions.

I have written the book to be relevant in terms of the literature in the field of individual and group psychotherapy with men, but more important I have chosen to give you a very personal look at this work. In the spirit of Irvin Yalom, psychiatrist and writer, I have shared with you interactive dialogues, as well as my private thoughts as I work with each man in both individual and group.

The book is organized to allow you to move from more general ideas and literature about men and therapy to the specifics of witnessing individual and group sessions. Part I includes background information on the Deepening Psychotherapy With Men model, as well as chapters on the principles of engaging men in individual therapy, the basics of group therapy as an approach, and what is unique and relevant about a men's therapy group. Part II highlights the individual therapy work and unique stories of the 10 men who will take part in the group therapy sessions described later. The chapters in Part II are written to give you both the background and a sense of how these men tell their stories, and how I as the therapist interact with and understand them. In each of these chapters, I emphasize the core issues each man is encountering, let you know why I believe the man would make a good group member, and ask you to reflect on the clinical issues raised in the sessions. In Part III, I lead you through a yearlong men's group that employs the principles of Deepening psychotherapy. These chapters, organized by the stage of the group, highlight dialog, developing relationships, and my perspective on the interventions and their impact. I also highlight practical tips for clinicians at the end of each of the group sessions. The final chapter answers questions about starting a men's group for your practice.

To protect confidentiality, all of the characteristics and names of the men depicted in the book have been significantly altered so that they are non-identifiable. The issues described are based on composites of individuals I have seen in my practice.

MY JOURNEY: WHY THIS BOOK TAKES A PERSONAL APPROACH

For more than 35 years, I have acted as a guide to help men deepen their experience of themselves and one another. Far from being draining, it has been exciting, enlivening, and personally gratifying. I have learned much from those I have been privileged to join in their therapeutic journeys. I hope my experiences and scholarship can offer clinicians working with men a foundation for innovation in their approaches. If you are a practicing psychotherapist who is looking for new insights, or a graduate student trainee new to working with men, this book is for you.

I have written this book in a very personal way because it represents a significant aspect of my journey as a man and psychotherapist. I believe that men are hungry to tell their stories but often feel ashamed of the messiness they encounter as they take on real life. Instead of thinking that we must always have it “together,” my assumption is that we all have to learn through our life experiences, including interactions with significant others, engaging in the world of school and work, and our attempts at finding meaning in the world. Often this means making mistakes, failing, and starting over. For me to encourage others to share their stories, I too must share mine. Although I may be a psychotherapist, I am also a fellow life traveler who has had to confront my own obstacles. Throughout the book, I reveal some of my own experiences as they are activated by the therapeutic work. It is my belief that exploring one’s own depth is a prerequisite to facilitating this in others.

THAWING MY OWN “ICE MAN” THROUGH THERAPY

Many of the men who come to see me seem encased in the restrictive cultural ice of what it means to be a man. I am no stranger to the metaphorical “Ice Man” (Rabinowitz, 2006). I know what it feels like to be barren and frozen in the realm of emotional expression. In my early life journey, I did catch glimpses of a possible “whole” self while high on drugs or in an alcohol-induced altered state of consciousness. I moved like a magnet toward emotionally intense women, hoping they would melt away my inner barrier to feeling. It was not until I gave in to the fact that I could not break free without help that I started to face my fear of what it meant to know my inner world.

My first therapy experience came in the fall after I graduated from college. I lacked direction. I felt trapped between depending on my well-meaning parents and my ex-girlfriend. I was afraid of being alone, yet I knew that none of these options felt right for me.

I committed to engaging in an in-depth self-analysis to learn how I had gotten to this stuck place. I was trapped by my demons of wanting others to accept and validate me, when I couldn’t do this for myself. I had to undress my fears of being too vulnerable and dependent. My iced exterior needed some heat from a psychotherapist, who did not know me in any other way. I hated having to go through this process but knew that I could not go on living a frozen, hidden life. I dreamed of being successful, but there was no way I was going to be the alive, engaged, spontaneous person I wished I could be without this painful undressing.

It was very uncomfortable, mainly because of my own built-in prejudices about going to therapy. I told myself that it must mean there is something really wrong with me, and I didn’t want to acknowledge I might be a defective human being. My first experience in treatment was with a female family systems therapist who was focused on my family dynamics. I initially resisted dismantling the narrative I had constructed about my mother and father as

relatively flawless human beings, but eventually I opened my eyes to our family history and how I fit in the model. I realized that my high need for approval and achievement orientation was adaptive for me and our family narrative of success. The side effect of being this way was excessive worry, fear of failure, and not being comfortable in my own skin.

Something different happened when I encountered a male therapist who seemed to focus more on understanding me as a man. His approach took into account my male socialization and left me with less self-loathing and more appreciation for both the benefits and liabilities of my upbringing.

As a part of my journey toward becoming a therapist and better understanding myself, I sought out various types of therapy. I spent a couple of years recording all of my dreams for weekly Jungian analytic therapy. Unexpectedly, talking about the meaning of my dreams was more powerful than I could have ever imagined. I regularly found deep wisdom in my nightly adventures that often led to tears in my analyst's office as we reviewed their meaning. In Gestalt therapy, I learned to be very present with my emotions, acting them out with exaggerated movements and often voicing my contradictions by speaking to various aspects of myself. I found that I could give voices to my little boy, my judge, and my ideal self, as well as my fears about trusting my own hopes and desires. I spent time in bioenergetics therapy, learning to listen more to my body and how it manifested many of my psychological conflicts. I went to couples therapy to work on my failing marriage, only to learn that both of us had contributed to the destructive dynamic that doomed our long-term viability. And of course, I have been a part of many men's therapy experiences both as a participant and leader. Learning to trust other men with my inner thoughts and emotions was perhaps one of the most important lessons I have taken in. To feel supported and realize that I was not alone in my questioning of the values I was supposed to embrace as a man was liberating and made me even more committed to my work with men as a psychotherapist.

The ice has become less thick. I trust my inner compass more. I seek out personal growth experiences and know how to tolerate and embrace the discomfort that comes with outside feedback and new learning. Being able to be open, take risks, and be genuine in my interactions has turned out to be a lifetime journey, but I wouldn't want it any other way.

It is my hope that this book inspires you to do exciting clinical work with men but also to look inward and reflect on what you can learn as you follow the therapeutic journeys of those I describe in the book.