

MEN - WHY WE GET SICK, SAD OR SUICIDAL

Don't get me wrong. I like being a bloke. But it does come with certain drawbacks. We die younger; we get sick more; we are much more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of violence; more likely to commit suicide; more likely to lose touch, painfully, with our kids. Why? Well - lots of reasons, but let me just explore a few that are intertwined with our history and culture.

War.

My grandfather, and my father, became men through war. My grandfather would have been judged clinically insane had he run from machine guns. My father had to go ever onward as he saw dear friends blown, literally, to pieces. They both learned, as a matter of survival, that inner turmoil must be suppressed and denied. It worked in war. It doesn't work in peace time. The great challenge, then, that I and millions like me faced was 'who will teach me to be a man in peace time?'. My father was a beautiful man, and taught me much, but my early journey through the inner world was made largely without him. And in the emotional absence of my father during my adolescence, how well placed am I to relate to and mentor my sons? Many young men are deeply lost, and I can't help but wonder if the traumatic gash in our culture caused by two such all-consuming wars (and other smaller ones along the way) has left us with an inter-generational crisis of maleness.

Cultural Change

I often ask students to do a 'stereotype' list of the perfect man in the 1950's. Then they do a list for the perfect man today. The lists might look something like this:

1950's

Good breadwinner
Strong
Muscular
Authority figure
Disciplinarian

2000's

Sharing the housework
Sensitive
Emotionally available
Non-controlling
Loving with the children

Now think about this: any people whose culture goes through radical change experience severe stress. Men have gone, within one generation, from having to be the macho male, to the sensitive, emotionally open home-lover. It actually worked well for me because I was a bit of a granny's blouse even back in the 60's, but it's a hell of a cultural change for us. One of the most important psychological questions we humans need to answer is 'who am I?'. When the world keeps changing it's mind on who you should be, the answer can become confused and your mental health can get shaky.

Do men matter?

When the Titanic went down with too few lifeboats, the cry went up 'women and children off first!!'. Of course it did - it is the cry of our whole culture. When wars are fought, we send men - young men - to fight and die. (This, fascinatingly enough, is beginning to change). Men have been deemed, for millennia, more dispensable. Of course, there's good survival-of-the-species reasons for this. But men have internalised this sense of dispensability in devastating ways. We Australian blokes die 5 - 7 years younger than women, and this is almost entirely due to the fact that we don't care for ourselves. We behave like we don't matter; like we're dispensable. We take terrible risks, we smoke and drink more, we don't protect ourselves from the sun, we eat badly, we work too hard and get too stressed and ignore the nagging depression and anxiety that most of us live with. Then, when we can ignore it no longer too many of us kill ourselves -4 - 5 times more often than women. And although we're sicker, we go to the doctor or other health professionals a lot less than women.

We are making choices that say, in a thousand ways "I don't matter". If there is one thing to instil in our sons, it is that they are sacred, profoundly important beings, and it is their duty to care for themselves, as well as caring for others. (Because, of course, if I don't care for and love myself, I am more likely to lash out and hurt others, or become so emotionally locked away that my loved ones - including children - can't know me).

Languages of inner space.

Women explore the world of emotions largely through words. Could it be that large numbers of men need different languages?

A Vietnam War Veteran once came to me when I was working in a government funding agency. He told me that his mates spoke of spiking the tyres of Vietnamese neighbours, that it was clear they needed ways to release the traumas and hatred they had endured during and since the war, and that counselling was not the way for them. He wanted a small amount of money for a club to hold paint ball war games. We didn't give it to him - we were worried it was fostering violence.

We were, of course, wrong. They were trying to find a language to exorcise the demons. And we told them they were using the wrong language.

In the beautiful film 'My Left Foot', the 'emotionally unavailable' father builds a new room for his son, brick by brick. The mother interprets this act to her son: "That's the closest he'll ever come to telling you he loves you". And what a language it is - this language of action. The three words "I love you", sacred as they are, can pale into insignificance next to an act like that.

The father and son that work on the car in the back shed, the mates who fish together, enjoying meaningless patter and long silences, the friends who go surfing and watch out for each other when a big set comes through, the footballers who stick by their teammates through thick and thin. These are no less acts of love and emotion and 'innerness' than a conversation about how we are feeling. These are the poetry of action rather than words, and we men should learn to love and celebrate them. Me, I love spoken words. But we don't all love spoken words. Others love doing, and giving, and being together. We must let these languages, too, speak of our love and our inner worlds.

A place at home

There is great reward in being more part of the family. Dirty nappies and messy dishes and wrinkled clothes are a pain, but are a part of a package that can bring real richness. I remember sitting up all night with my 2 year old son when he had a dangerously high fever. It was awful. And I have never loved more.

But there's lots standing in the way of us taking our place in the world of hearth and home - the world we began to leave during the industrial revolution. Partly, of course, we remain in the comfort zone of patriarchal (and sometimes lazy) role definitions. But, too, there are cultural disincentives in place. We are ridiculed for our cooking, shooed out of the kitchen at dinner time, and impatiently lectured when we put the linen back 'in the wrong place', and we often play along. Most of us are not really being asked - or asking - to 'share the domestic duties'. We're being asked to help. We are the assistant domestic help. And it feels demeaning and belittling and we find ourselves feeling powerless and frustrated. This should be no surprise. Anyone feels the same when their skills are ridiculed or ignored (by themselves or others) in any workplace, and the home is no different.

If you think this is not inherent in our culture, just watch the consistent role that men play in advertisements about household goods and foods. The jokes - at least in Australia - largely focus on domestically hopeless men.

Bringing home the bacon

And there's another thing. Powerful cultural forces are at play within and around us, telling us that we should be a full time breadwinner. Almost every woman I know has, at some point, chosen to move to part time (paid) work spending more hours in the home. I am not suggesting that this 'home based' time is not work - it can be the most important, sacred and sometimes exhausting work we do. But men aren't making that choice - women are. We all incur costs for this. One is the separation of men from their families, and the messy, rich love that family immerses us in. If their paid job is an alienating one, as so many are, this can lead to a place of terrible meaninglessness for many men.

I sometimes wonder if men wouldn't rather be - literally - dead than a 'failure' at work. A few years ago a lawyer in Perth told me that he could name 5 (all male) lawyers in Perth who had killed themselves in the previous twelve months. He put that down to the stressful working environment that had been created as the law went from being a profession to a business. What madness is at play here? Why could these men not choose to opt out of their work, rather than their life?

As I said, I like being a bloke. For all these concerns, we are not victims. Quite the opposite. Many of the actions that are making us sick or sad or dead are self-imposed. We have the freedom to choose. But to choose well we, and those around us, need to be conscious of the historical and cultural forces that play within and around us, so that we can better navigate our way through the wondrous and mysterious journey of being human, and being men.

Tim Muirhead is Director of the 'CSD Network' in Perth, Western Australia. 'CSD' stands for Community, Spirit, and Development. His paid and voluntary work has involved him significantly in men's issues.