

# Masculinity, Violence, and Bandaid Solutions

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## [Content note: violence, guns, mass shootings, misogyny]

We're all familiar with the pattern now: a solitary young white man goes on a shooting rampage. People die. The media describes him as "crazy," "disturbed," "troubled," "insane." Everyone collectively bemoans the failings of our mental healthcare system, presuming that its failure is relevant here. People with mental illnesses cringe at the reminder of what our society thinks of them. A few people advocate stricter restrictions on guns. The victims are buried and memorialized, the killer's parents shunned or comforted, and the killer gradually forgotten.

And it happens over. And over. And over. Again.

Whatever depth there is in this analysis is limited to the parts of the internet where I live. You won't see the anchors and talk show hosts on CNN or MSNBC or, obviously, Fox News, wondering what it is about white men that produces so relatively many mass shooters—relative to other gender/racial groups and relative to other countries. They will talk about one of two things, mostly depending on their party affiliation: gun control or mental healthcare.

And it's so difficult to ask them to talk about something else because we *should* be talking about gun control and mental healthcare. More and better gun control and more and better mental healthcare would vastly improve quality of life in the United States, and maybe in the right combination, could even prevent many of these shootings.

But wouldn't it be better to fight the ideas and beliefs that lead to violence?

There's plenty of evidence that Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old white man who [murdered six people and injured seven more in Santa Barbara yesterday](#), felt entitled to sex with women and hated them for denying it to him. In a YouTube video uploaded just a day before the mass shooting, [Rodger said](#):

*You girls have never been attracted to me. I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me but I will punish you all for it. It's an injustice, a crime because I don't know what you don't see in me, I'm the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at all these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman. I will punish all of you for it. [laughs]*

*On the day of retribution, I am going to enter the hottest sorority house at UCSB and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up, blond slut I see inside there. All those girls I've desired so much. They have all rejected me and looked down on me as an inferior man if I ever made a sexual advance toward them, while they throw themselves at these obnoxious brutes.*

*I take great pleasure in slaughtering all of you. You will finally see that I am, in truth, the superior one, the true alpha male. [laughs]*

If this weren't terrifying enough, [OllieGarkey at Daily Kos](#) points out that the YouTube channels to which Rodger has been subscribed included well-known men's rights activists. According to [David Futrelle](#), he was also a commenter at PUAHate, a misogynistic forum that has been down since the shooting. On one forum post, [Rodger wrote](#):

*Women have control over which men get sex and which men don't, thus having control over which*

*men breed and which men don't. Feminism gave women the power over the future of the human species. Feminism is evil.*

Rodger's various online postings have all the language of sexual entitlement and misogyny: "get sex," "breed," "alpha male," "slut," "not fair." I've heard this from many men who have assaulted or abused me or others. It is not uncommon.

I'm going to say something that should be obvious: a minority of men think about women in quite this violent and hateful a way. An even smaller minority act on that violence so brazenly. But many men violate women's boundaries and autonomy constantly, and *all* men are socialized to think about themselves, about sex, and about women in similar ways.

In the coming days you will hear all about mental illness. (This is because most people only talk about mental illness when they get to blame an act of violence on it, and not when millions of people are merely suffering in silence.) You will hear about how the mental healthcare system failed Rodger, how mental healthcare is too expensive, how there aren't enough mental healthcare professionals, how insurance coverage is fucked up, how medication doesn't work or doesn't work well enough or works too well, how irresponsible parents don't get their children mental healthcare quickly enough.

You will not hear that, while 2 percent of violent acts can be attributed to people with mental illnesses, people with mental illnesses are four times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than people without mental illnesses. You will not hear about the ways in which people with mental illnesses are discriminated against for many reasons, one of which is that they're believed to be inherently violent, partially because of how the media focuses on mental illness in the wake of every single mass shooting. You will not hear that Black people who commit violent acts are never presumed to be mentally ill; they're just presumed to be Black. You will not hear about how it's only "terrorism" if a brown person does it; the fact that it's politically motivated and intended to terrorize a particular group of people is not, apparently, enough. You will hear a lot about "not all men," but you will not hear that misandry irritates and misogyny kills.

You will not hear that boys and men are taught to believe that they are entitled to women's bodies in uncountable ways, every day, in every setting, by their parents and by the media and by everyone else. You will not hear again about [the boy who stabbed a girl to death for refusing to go to prom with him](#), or about [this entire list of women](#) being hurt or killed for ignoring or rebuffing men's sexual interests, or the constant daily acts of violence to which women are subjected for exercising their right to autonomy.

And before you call Rodger "crazy": it is not actually "crazy" to believe stuff that's been shoved down your throat from birth.

I wish it were. It'd be nice if humans reasoned rationally by default, that if you grow up with people telling you things that don't make sense, like religion or that sex is dirty or that women owe you anything at all, you'd just go, "Well, that makes no sense!" and refuse to ever believe it.

But we didn't evolve that way, at least not yet. Unless we work very hard at it, we'll inevitably believe what we're taught so incessantly, as sexism is taught to all of us. Yet we are all capable of rational thought if we work at it, which is why I hold Rodger and all other men who believe in their conditioning and subject women to violence fully accountable for their actions.

A very good therapist could have helped Rodger with this process. Maybe. But when mass shootings happen and everyone bemoans the fact that the shooter didn't go to (or wasn't helped by) therapy, they never seem to ask themselves what this therapy would entail. You don't go to therapy or go on medication and suddenly become happy. What you have to do is unlearn the maladaptive and harmful ways in which you've learned (or been taught to) think. For someone like me, this means learning not to be so afraid and not to treat every minor setback as the end of the world. In Rodger's case, this might've meant learning how to be okay with not having sex with women for a while, learning the social skills to eventually find and keep a partner, and, most importantly, learning that women *do not owe him a single damn thing*. With that realization might've come freedom.

In other words, the way to help Rodger would have been to help him unlearn what he *never should have learned in the first place*. And there's no guarantee that even the best of therapists could succeed at this; everyone in the field knows that sometimes clients are just beyond help (at least by a given therapist) and that it's tragic and sad and don't we wish we could've caught them earlier?

What if our culture had never taught Rodger these horrible beliefs?

What if our culture didn't *still* treat women as possessions?

What if our culture didn't emphasize hypermasculinity and getting laid at all costs?

What if, what if, what if.

So everyone's going to blame our faulty mental healthcare system now. But let's do a thought experiment.

A child is born in an area with terrible preventative healthcare. They don't receive a single vaccine, and they are never taught about healthy eating, hygiene, and exercise. Nobody models good health for them, nobody teaches them in early childhood about the importance of washing your hands. Getting medical check-ups and physicals isn't even an option. They have no idea what a healthy blood pressure or heart rate might look like. As far as this child knows, a doctor is where you go when you're so sick you're dying.

At 22 years of age, this person is now so sick that they're dying. They have had a horrible diet for their entire life, and they have never treated their body well. They have suffered from increasingly worsening symptoms for weeks, but didn't realize that they needed to see a doctor. The disease they have is one that they never received the vaccine for. Finally, at 22 years of age, this person goes to the hospital, and the doctors do their best but are unable to save them. The person dies.

Do you blame the doctors who tried but failed to keep this person alive? Or do you blame the entire system, the fact that there was never any preventative healthcare, the fact that they were not given a vaccine *and* they were not taught the skills to make contracting diseases less likely?

The type of masculinity that young boys are taught is not compatible with mental health and with ethical behavior. Full stop. We're fortunate that so relatively few will take it to the lengths that Rodger did, but I don't know a single man who doesn't suffer as a direct consequence of it. I know few who have never made *others* suffer as a direct consequence of it. We need to inoculate boys against this harmful and maladaptive thinking rather than teach it to them.

Improving and reforming and revolutionizing mental healthcare is important, but it's too important to discuss only in the few days after a mass shooting has happened. If this is something you care about, join me in discussing it *all the damn time*.

Remember this: by the time someone is in their early twenties and spewing hatred and bitterness, it may very well be too late. It's never too late, however, to work harder at unlearning the lies we are taught about gender.