

How to Fight Toxic Masculinity

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Toxic masculinity is best described as a box. It's narrow, rigid, and men have to contort themselves to fit inside it.

To fit in the man box of toxic masculinity, a man must live by a particular set of beliefs and behaviors:

- Suffer pain in silence
- Have no needs
- Never lose
- Show no emotions other than bravado or rage
- Don't depend on anyone
- Don't do anything that could be construed as weakness

- Never snitch.

The man box also requires that men buy into a rigid hierarchy in which straight men are dominant over everybody else. Furthermore, among straight men, the man box decrees that hypermasculine men are dominant over men who reject or find themselves outside the box.

If you don't fit in the man box, you pay the price. At best, you risk invisibility. At worst, you risk disrespect, bullying, or even violence.

But this scramble for dominance and denial of emotion comes at great cost. It blunts men's awareness of other people's needs and emotions, drives domestic and sexual violence, makes aggression look like a reasonable way to solve conflict, forbids seeking health care (and even thinking about seeking mental health care), and pours fuel on the fire of drug and alcohol abuse.

Toxic masculinity even invades life's small pleasures. To paraphrase the comedian Bill Burr, the man box means you can't admit a baby is cute, hug a puppy, say you want a cookie, order banana pancakes, or carry an umbrella in the rain ("Get those shoulders up!").

Now, there is a difference between traditional masculinity and toxic masculinity: There is nothing toxic about working hard, providing for one's family, winning at sports, or being loyal to friends. Most importantly, there's nothing toxic about wanting to be respected. All humans want to feel respected—we all want to know we are valued, recognized, and affirmed.

While there's nothing toxic about needing respect, taking desperate and extreme measures to force what looks like respect (but is actually fear) is a direct result of toxic masculinity. Men who don't feel respected may make up for it by dominating others.

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This all reflects a paradox. As a *group*, men *are* dominant. Men are more likely to be hired and get paid more for the same work that others do. They largely lead our governments, businesses, and religious institutions. If men don't have children, their character isn't questioned, but if they do, "helping" is usually deemed sufficient. The chances of sexual harassment and assault are lower for men. And men can be rude, outspoken, unattractive, or fat and the impact is negligible or even positive. The list goes on.

See also: Is Gender Equality Really Possible?

But as *individuals*, many men don't recognize power or privilege in their day-to-day lives. Individual men often feel powerless due to factors that have little to do with gender: racism, poverty, a rapidly evolving job market, or lack of access to education. And when a

man feels powerless, he may double down on fitting into the man box in order to reclaim a feeling of control over his own destiny. The result? Toxic masculinity that hurts everyone, including the men who ascribe to it and the boys who are taught it.

So how to do away with the man box? That's a bigger order than a 15-minute podcast can handle, but here are 4 places to start:

Tip #1: Offer a reality check

In a study in the journal *Sex Roles*, researchers asked a group of male college students to rate how much they agreed with certain statements about women, such as "Women are too easily offended" or "Women are usually sweet until they've caught a man, but then they let their true self show." Next, the men were asked the same questions again, but were instructed to rate the beliefs of "the average man in the room."

This and other research has found that men consistently overestimate the sexism of other men. They engage in what's called *pluralistic ignorance*, which is the assumption that their attitudes are in the minority, when in fact they're in the majority. In another example, a college student may feel pressured to binge drink because they perceive that everyone does, but in fact, a majority don't.

In the case of sexist attitudes, if a man assumes he's surrounded by men who are more sexist than he is, he's less likely to speak up when he witnesses sexist behavior and more likely to silently and uncomfortably return the high-five his buddy offers. The result? Pluralistic ignorance gets reinforced.

But wait; let's go back to the study: After all the questionnaires were answered, half the men got no feedback, while the other half were told about the discrepancies and briefed on what was actually the norm. After three weeks, everyone filled out the questionnaires again. What happened? The group that got the feedback had a more accurate view of where most men stood.

According to the study, recalibrating attitudes is possible. It could reduce sexist displays and increase speaking up against sexual harassment, rude jokes, or asking one's equal female colleague to get the coffee.

Tip #2: Be vocal about opting out of the man box

Men who need the most help are often the least likely to seek it out, a phenomenon known as *double jeopardy*.

But in a series of studies, when men perceived that their male friends and relatives sought help and made healthy choices, they were more likely to do the same. From drinking and driving to smoking to using condoms, the results held. In short, when men see social proof in other men, it gives them permission to be healthy, too.

Therefore, when a man defies the box, it's important to be vocal about opting out. When a man rejects suffering in silence, he becomes a role model and paves the way for other men to get help and be healthy, especially those who need it most.

Tip #3: Make clear that any activity is manly if a man is passionate about it

While there's nothing inherently wrong with feeling the urge to mow the lawn after watching a rom-com, it's a sign that some activities are okay or not okay for "real men" to engage in. Toxic masculinity takes this a step further and draws a bright line. It says that some activities are manly—think woodworking, football, or MMA—and therefore acceptable, but others are absolutely not.

Doing an activity not on the man-card-approved list not only sparks insecurity and doubt but also drives many men to compensate when they feel their masculinity is threatened. It's another way of keeping men in the man box.

For example, a fascinating study out of Taiwan looked at the link between masculine activities and energy drinks. With names like Venom, Full Throttle, and—I am not making this up—Bawls, energy drinks are directly targeted to young men looking to up their manliness game.

In the study, nearly 100 undergrad men filled out a questionnaire about favorite activities, all of which were deliberately gender-neutral, like going on Facebook, traveling, and drinking coffee. Next, the men were given one of three types of bogus feedback: they were told that their activities of choice scored high on masculinity, low on masculinity, or they were given no feedback at all, thus creating three conditions where masculinity was affirmed, threatened, or remained neutral.

Then, each man ostensibly took part in an energy drink taste test. They were told they could drink as much as they wanted of two different energy drink flavors in order to establish a preference. What happened? The men whose masculinity had been threatened drank significantly more than those whose masculinity was affirmed or left alone.

Now, the masculinity push-down pop-up effect isn't necessarily destructive, especially when the worst-case scenario is swigging too much caffeine and having to pee in the middle of your snowboarding run or BMX race. But compensation is problematic when the consequences are dire: mass shootings, domestic violence, and other extreme methods of defending your "man card."

Question the very idea of manly versus non-manly activities, and teach boys that any activity they are passionate about is "man enough." And if they do feel the need to affirm their masculinity, encourage them to do it in ways that build themselves up without tearing others down. I'll let you choose whether or not that includes drinking something called Bawls.

Tip #4: Encourage Multiple Roles and Relationships

Men's lives are too often built like an upside-down pyramid. Because toxic masculinity says men are not allowed to have close relationships with anyone besides a wife, they put all their eggs in one relationship basket. Likewise, toxic masculinity limits a man to the provider role, which means that his job often becomes his identity. So when layoffs, unemployment, or divorce roll around, the upside-down pyramid crumbles around him.

But when men expand their roles, everyone benefits. For instance, father involvement improves kids' lives in so many ways: kids who spend time with their dads and get emotional support from them have lower delinquency, less depression, and even higher life satisfaction. Everyone wins when men build strong ties with family, friends, and community.

Toxic masculinity hurts us all. So remember: not as many men ascribe to the strictures of the man box as we'd believe. Broadcast widely whenever the man box is defied. And encourage a broad range of roles and relationships for all men. Everyone will benefit. After all, who doesn't want to hug a puppy?