

Prevention Column

TOXIC MASCULINITY – NOVEMBER 2021

Toxic masculinity: models to be dismantled

Traditionally, men have been expected to be strong, virile, powerful and in control of any situation. Being vulnerable has not been an option! However, there is evidence that this unrealistic notion of how men should and shouldn't be is unhealthy and that it causes serious harm to both men and society. A brief look at toxic masculinity.

- 1 in 5 men **will not reach the age of 50** in the Americas, **due to issues relating to toxic masculinity**.¹
- **Life expectancy** for men in the Americas is **5.8 years below that of women**, partly because societal expectations contribute to risk-seeking behaviors.²
- **Suicide rates are 3 times higher** among men compared to women.³



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What is **toxic masculinity**?

Since early times, men and women have been subject to codes, norms and ideals constructed by society on how they should and shouldn't act. Based on traditional role models, women tend to be gentle, caring and accommodating. Men are expected to be invincible, protective and in full control of their emotions.

Yet, all men have qualities traditionally considered feminine. However, societal norms don't encourage males to develop or express them. We are talking about toxic masculinity when the pressure to conform causes harm to a person's health or to society in general. Strong, virile, aggressive, controlling, family breadwinner, stoic, independent... These are all terms to describe how masculinity is often understood. This model is so firmly rooted in our cultural baggage, and encouraged and passed from one generation to the next, that it influences a myriad of toxic behaviours. So toxic that men are affected... to the point of getting sick.



PERSISTENT STEREOTYPES

As they develop, children go through what is called a socialization process. This is when they assimilate the values that are instilled in them, and the norms and codes that shape life in society and that help them build their identity. During this stage, they imitate family, friends and the role models to which they are exposed. However, much of our culture and our way of life promotes traditional male role models.

"If you're a man, then fight!"; "Stop crying like a girl!"; "Act like a man!"; "Stand up like a man!"; "You have no balls!" These expressions alone show the extent to which society's expectations of men are focused on strength and the repression of emotions. The traditional male role model requires that men be invincible, successful and powerful. Expressing their pain is basically an admission of weakness.

There's no doubt that men are suffering. In silence. ■



Me? Vulnerable? Never!

In 2018, the American Psychological Association published its *APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men*,⁴ specifically because it was focused on the toxic notion of traditional masculinity harming the physical and mental health of boys and men.

A report by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)⁵ shows that the social constructions of masculinity fuel the neglect by men of their mental and physical health. By ignoring their emotions and physical symptoms, in an effort to repress any form of emotion or apparent weakness at all costs, males put themselves at risk.

The proof? Globally, the sex ratio at birth is 105 boys per 100 girls. However, from age 10, and at an accelerated pace from age 15, the gap between the number of girls and boys narrows. Between the ages of 30 and 40, the proportion starts to reverse. Among over-80s, there are 190 women per 100 men. Why? Because men die at a younger age.

According to the Canadian Men's Health Foundation,⁶ half of Canadian men are in poor health. The reason cited: they avoid hospitals and, over time, neglect their health. What's more, they develop unhealthy lifestyles that predispose them to cancer and heart disease.

Mental health is no exception. Although anxiety, depression and mental illness affect all of us, regardless of gender, suicide rates are three times higher among men compared to women.⁷ ■

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

By perpetuating toxic masculinity models and continuing to encourage unhealthy norms and expectations, collateral damage occurs. Toxic masculinity is often behind the following:

- transphobia and homophobia
- domestic violence and spousal abuse
- sex offences
- accidents related to reckless behaviour
- etc.

All of society pays the price. Just think about crime rates. Men are overrepresented when it comes to offenders of major crimes. ■

Possible solutions

It takes time to change behaviours and perceptions that are part and parcel of our upbringing. They are firmly established and seen as normal. Yet there are things that can be done to turn things around and to introduce new, healthier notions of masculinity.

A FEW EXAMPLES:

- Teach children from an early age and by example that chores are not gender-specific.
- Avoid giving toys traditionally seen as more feminine to girls and more masculine to boys.
- Present a variety of worker models.
- Teach that emotions are healthy and encourage children to express them.
- Remove the stigma around mental illness and encourage males to ask for help when they're not feeling well, either emotionally or physically. ■



SOME PROGRESS ... but still a long way to go

As a society, we've made good progress since a time when men were not involved in family life and never said "I love you" to their kids. We've made important steps as a society, such as the participation of men in household chores and in raising children, the establishment of parental leave programs, the reduction in homophobia, awareness-raising on violence against women and the recent speaking out by men against it.

Nevertheless, traditional models are still deeply entrenched in many facets of our society, including in the roles of men and women. According to the *Institut de la statistique du Québec*, in 2015, women devoted one hour more per day to unpaid work, compared with men (e.g. household tasks, shopping, lunches and other meals). **In 2019, the number of hours women were absent from work due to personal or family obligations was four times higher than that for men.**⁸

Furthermore, although the movements denouncing domestic violence, femicide and sex offences often highlight women's suffering, they are also starting to raise awareness of what men are actually facing: unrealistic societal expectations. The dialogue is opening up little by little. It must continue. ■

In conclusion

Many men are used to repressing their emotions and pain, and many neglect their health and don't ask for help. This behaviour is a reflection of the unhealthy pressure exerted by traditional masculinity models that have been around for years. Collectively, we can benefit from taking a look at our expectations of men and encouraging them to talk about what they need. It's not just men who will benefit, but society as a whole. ■

1. Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), *1 in 5 men will not reach the age of 50 in the Americas, due to issues relating to toxic masculinity*. Online: https://www3.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15599:1-in-5-men-will-not-reach-the-age-of-50-in-the-americas-due-to-issues-relating-to-toxic-masculinity&Itemid=1926&lang=en
2. *Ibid.*
3. Government of Canada, *Deaths and hospitalizations*. Online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/suicide-canada-key-statistics-infographic.html>
4. American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, *APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men*, 2018. Online: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/boys-men-practice-guidelines.pdf>
5. Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), *Masculinities and Health in the Region of the Americas. Executive Summary*. Washington, PAHO, 2019. Online: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/masculinities-and-health-region-americas>
6. Cited in Marie Lambert-Chan, "Santé des hommes : le syndrome superman," *La Presse*, August 14, 2015. Online: <https://www.lapresse.ca/vivre/sante/201508/14/01-4892705-sante-des-hommes-le-syndrome-superman.php>
7. *Ibid.*
8. Gouvernement du Québec, *Effects of Stereotypes on Personal Development*, [Online: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/family-and-support-for-individuals/childhood/child-development/effects-stereotypes-personal-development>] (Accessed on September 29, 2021.)