

Men and Emotions: The Importance of Becoming Vulnerable

When it comes to processing emotions, there are different expectations for men and women. Because women are often viewed as “sensitive,” it’s socially acceptable for them to express their feelings, like sadness or fear. But men, who are seen as strong and fearless, are not encouraged to outwardly express their emotions.

These cultural norms and gender stereotypes have been circulating for generations, and they can be toxic, especially for males. Men who express their emotions are often seen as weak. Because of that, many men neglect to show their emotions because they’re afraid of the repercussions. However, suppressing emotions and feelings can be incredibly detrimental to a man’s mental health.

Why Do Men Hide Their Emotions?

There’s no argument that women are more likely to show their emotions than men. From an early age, men are conditioned to believe that expressing their feelings is out of character with the male identity. Doing so can ruin their image of being strong and stoic. Specifically, men are told that crying in front of other people will threaten their masculinity.

The same can be said about mental health. Statistically, women are more likely to get diagnosed with depression or anxiety. However, men also deal with mental health disorders and mental distress. Over 30% of men will experience a period of depression at some point during their lifetime, and about 9% of men report having feelings of depression or anxiety every day.

Just because men are told to hide their emotions, doesn't mean they don't have them. Research shows that men experience emotions at the same level that women do. But because it's not socially acceptable for a man to cry when he's sad, it can make it seem like men don't experience sadness at all.

In fact, men who experience sadness or grief are more likely to channel those feelings into different emotions that are seen as more socially acceptable. For instance, a man who is experiencing sadness or depression might be more likely to act aggressively or get angry over something small, rather than cry.

Emotions that are associated with dominance or strength are viewed as more masculine, even if the underlying emotion fueling the behavior is different. But when men are told to hide their emotions at all costs, those feelings have to go somewhere. Usually, they compensate by acting in a way that is more stereotypically masculine.

The Consequences of Emotional Avoidance

Part of what makes us human is our ability to feel our feelings and process our emotions. When we're happy, we want to smile and show excitement. When we're angry, our body tenses up and our voice level rises. When we're sad, we naturally want to cry.

When we avoid those emotions, it can lead to a number of consequences, including mental health disorders. Suppressing emotions can lead to depression and anxiety, but for men especially, it can also increase their risk of suicide. Men are much more likely to commit suicide than women. In 2018, men died by suicide about 3.56 times more often than women did.

For men, being told to “man up” or “act like a man” is something they learn in childhood, and it stays with them into adulthood. Over time, men get really good at turning off their emotions or coping with their feelings in a way that is more acceptable for males. It creates a cycle of toxic masculinity, which can be hard to break once it’s a habit.

How Men Can Learn to Be Vulnerable

The solution to this issue is for men to learn how to become vulnerable and allow themselves to express their emotions freely. However, this is often easier said than done. It can be difficult for men to feel comfortable showing their emotions, especially if they’ve been hiding them all their life. Here are some ways that men can start becoming more vulnerable to their emotions.

1. Be honest about the way you’re feeling

To be vulnerable, you need to be honest about the way you’re feeling. So often, men will feel a glimmer of sadness or grief and quickly shut it down. In order to open up about your emotions, you need to accept them and feel them. Recognize the way you’re feeling, and try to figure out what’s making you feel that way. Allow yourself to express those emotions however it feels right.

2. Find therapeutic hobbies

Finding hobbies that allow yourself to reflect on your feelings is a great way to tap into your emotions. One man who suffered from lifelong depression and anxiety realized that walking his dog always helped him feel better. He eventually started the organization Dudes & Dogs, which allows men to get together in nature and have real conversations, often about mental health. Other examples of therapeutic activities are cooking, exercising, art, and music.

3. See a therapist

Men are less likely to see a therapist than women. Part of that is due to the negative stigma around men and mental health. However, seeing a therapist is one of the best ways that men can learn to open up about their feelings. Therapy is a safe space for men to be vulnerable without judgment from anyone else. It can help you learn how to feel your feelings and cope with your emotions in a more healthy and productive way.

If you're dealing with mental health distress, it might be time to ask for help. Getting treatment early on can keep a small problem from growing into a more serious mental health condition later on.

By: Sam Dekin

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