



# **An Epidemic of Male Loneliness and its Possible Solutions**

By Georgia Dodd



We are sitting in the living room of Dylan Feldmeier and his girlfriend, Ella, at the University of Connecticut. They are both seniors at UCONN and Dylan is a member of the fraternity Sigma Phi Epsilon. It is a very comfortable home, their first home. There are lots of soft sofas and rugs. Hanging on the wall opposite of us are pictures of Dylan and Ella in cute couple poses with a field of sunflowers behind them. Just that week they adopted a gray kitten named Atticus that dangerously blends in with the carpet and actively tries to attack shoes. If held for more than 30 seconds, Atticus starts drifting into a dream world chasing mice and eating lasagna, his favorite food apparently. As we started our conversation, loud purrs and meows sound in the background.

“I think I was looking for [a] strong sense of brotherhood. And really what that’s defined as it’s more than just its friends it’s people that look out for your well-being. College can be a challenging time. It’s nice to have a good support system.” Dylan said, cradling Atticus in his arms, “They’re people you can, one you can expect them to show up. Like, I did a kind of a showcase of my photography. That’s kind of a unique thing about me that doesn’t necessarily have to do with the fraternity but I had over 50 brothers come to a seminar that I gave. So, you can always count on them to be there and actually be excited to and be interested in what other brothers are interested in.”

This semester, Feldmeier became more involved in his fraternity. He led a guided tour of the UCONN forest. After their hike, many of the members came up to him afterwards sharing their appreciation for showing them what hiking could be like as people who came from cities with few opportunities to explore the wilderness. It’s activities like these that bring the fraternity together and encourage emotional growth.

It’s activities like these that bring the fraternity together and encourage emotional growth. For example, the Sigma Phi Epsilon chapter at UCONN has a camping retreat in the woods and during this retreat all members participate in an event called Life Maps, “In Life Maps it is very open you can say anything you want about your life any challenges that you faced or success anything, everything that’s gotten you to this point via your passions are troubled anything. And that can be a very emotional time. It’s like the only time where we really opened up like that, become a little bit more vulnerable.” Dylan said, “And, like for me example, like we just had it two months ago like I bawled my eyes out, like talking about challenges in my life and you know, how the fraternity has helped me get through some of those challenges. So definitely the feel of the comfortability there to do that.”



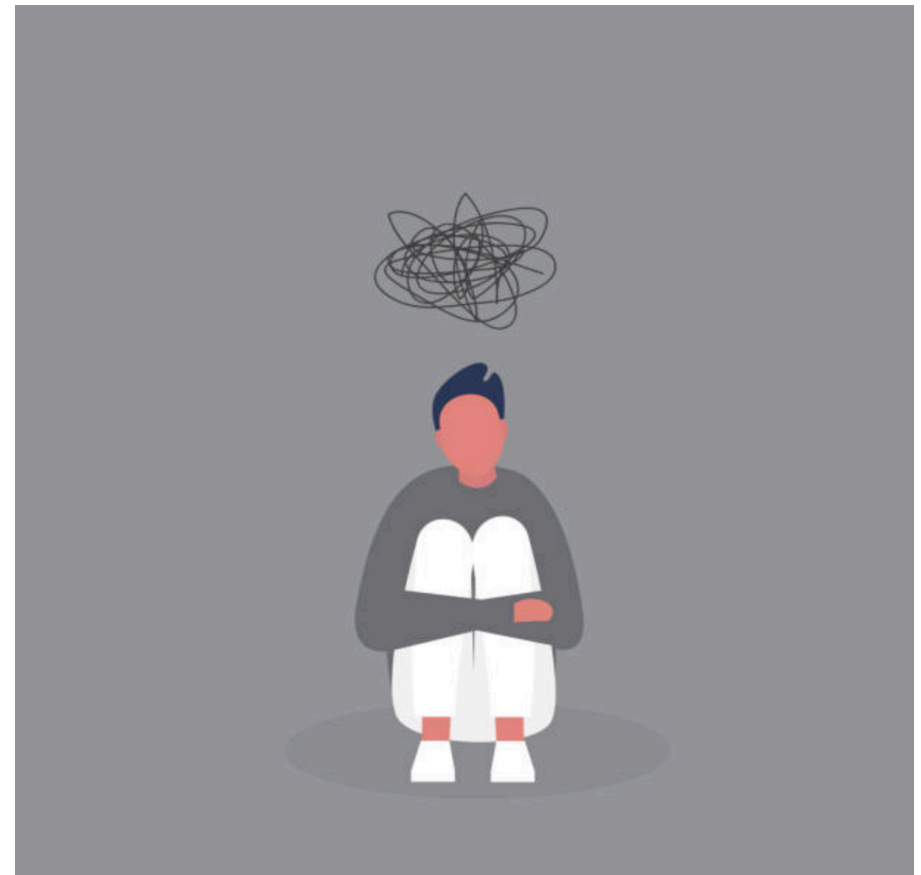
In recent years toxic masculinity, misogyny and increased instances of violence against women have been the topic of conversation. Many have suggested that these are all a result of sexism in the way that we raise men and the stereotypes and standards that men are held to. Men are often told to be strong and not show any emotions; that showing emotions is “girly” and “un-manly.” As men grow up, the friendships that they made fade and many young men are left with nowhere and no one to go to talk about their emotions and feeling. We must ask ourselves, what are good places for men to find acceptance? Where are men trying to find community? Where are men going to ask questions and get guidance?

In the 2018 APA survey, teens and young adults reported worse mental health and higher levels of anxiety and depression than all other age groups. While there were many studies exploring women’s mental health, it is hard to find studies in the United States that talk about men’s mental health. The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry conducted a study over eight years that found that psychological distress increased in young men ages 20 to 24 years old, unlike anyone else. It found that 25% of young men have no one outside of their immediate family to rely on, 37% report they’re not satisfied with the quality of their relationships, 61% have lost contact with more friends than they would have liked to and 50% of men rarely talk about deep personal issues with friends.

Men were significantly higher in levels of loneliness in a lot of surveys, while women were significantly higher in depression. However, many doctors believe that the number of depression diagnoses correlates with the fact that men often will not admit they are depressed. Men will rarely mention any emotional or behavioral difficulties to their doctors at all, if they do happen to disclose any problems, they tend to describe problems at work including diminished job performance or difficulty functioning. Instead, they identify with terms like “lonely” or “stressed”.

Men have a tendency to deny illness, self-monitor and self-treat symptoms. They avoid professional health care providers and services as a means to enact and preserve their masculinity all in an effort to avoid or numb the awareness of an underlying and often detrimental problem. The symptoms that men exhibit that doctors recognize as symptoms of depression are problems that men will often exhibit but not necessarily identify as problems that need to be rectified like anger, irritability, and social isolation.

There are a lot of social stereotypes and beliefs like the phrases “big boys don’t cry”, “man up” or “no homo” that suggest that boys and men in particular should not “whine”. These values are often promoted by parents and other caretakers and profoundly shape boys’ and men’s gender identities, roles, and relationships as well as their health care practices.



Courtesy of Gettys Images

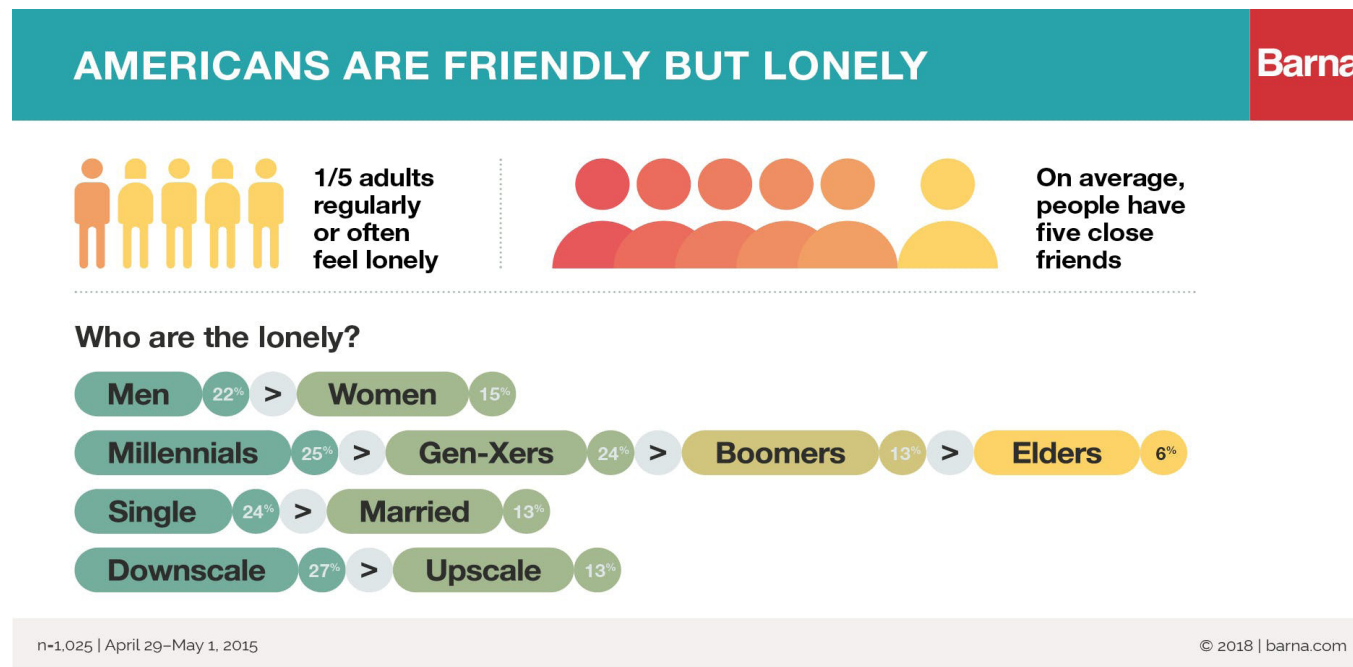
The American Psychological Association said on their website about men's health "Psychologists and other mental health providers are also giving special attention to men's mental health issues given men's greater resistance to even seeking treatment, their greater discomfort with emotional expression and their higher risk of abusive anger, substance abuse, risky behavior and suicide."

As a way to address this issue, many professionals try to exchange terms like "sessions" with "consultation" or "meetings". Psychologists and doctors have tried engaging in activities like sports or games while talking with their male patients about their feelings which they have found was effective in helping them open up.

Many physicians agree that men often respond to depression differently than women. They exhibit escapist tendencies, such as spending a lot of time at work or on sports, have problems with alcohol or drug use as a way to "self-treat", exhibit controlling, violent or abusive behavior and engage in risky behavior.

According to the World Health Organization "Globally, death by suicide occurred about 1.8 times more often among males than among females in 2008, and 1.7 times in 2015." This is a huge issue and it is not being addressed properly. Many physicians believe that many men lack the emotional support system that is helpful when treating depression and anxiety

In Niobe Way's book *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*, Way challenges stereotypes about boys, men and masculinity. She reveals the intense intimacy among teenage boys especially during adolescence. Boys share their deepest secrets and feelings with their closest male friends when they are young. In late adolescence, however, boys feel they have to "man up" by becoming unemotional and independent. Emotions and intimate friendships are for girls and gay men. Way argues that boys are experiencing a "crisis of connection" because they live in a culture where human emotions are given a sex and a sexuality. Those who identify as neither are left out.





A place that many young men go to for community and friendship as young adults are fraternities on college campuses. However, fraternity members are at a higher risk for alcohol and drug abuse than the rest of the college population. However, young men are more likely to drink excessively than young women are as suggested by research. Men are also more likely than women to engage in risky or dangerous activities or feel pressured by male competition. According to a Harvard study, four out of five fraternity and sorority members are binge drinkers.

According to the North-American Interfraternity Conference, the number of fraternity members has increased an average of 4 percent, every year for the past decade. Almost 98,000 men were initiated in 2013-2014 while almost 100,000 were initiated in 2015-2016. There were more than 270,000 undergraduate members in the 74 fraternities in the conference in 2013-2014 and there were almost 400,000 undergraduate members in 2015-2016. There are about 6,200 chapters on 800 campuses nationwide.

There are a lot of preconceived notions that people have about fraternities, that are often based in a lot of facts. Natalie, Genevieve and Madison, sorority sisters at Kappa Kappa Gamma at New York University, address some of these ideas. “They literally only join to like party.” Madison said, “Most of the frats got kicked off campus because they hazed really badly and NYU is really serious about that.”

“My freshman year there was one frat that people referred to as the rape frat. I think it was what I was like pike or something. They got kicked off. Like most people in Kappa have like been drugged by like frat guys.” Genevieve said.

“Yeah, I think I don’t really understand this at NYU, but a lot of colleges. I know that it’s hard to go to parties as guys because they only let girls in. So being in a frat, is the only way to go to parties together.” Natalie said.



UConn Sigma Alpha

Adam Reed is a 23-year-old Finance and Economics major and member of Sigma Phi Epsilon at Washington University in St. Louis. Reed rushed for fraternities as a Sophomore to find a sense of community and a place to party. Reed said, “I was really looking for someplace to, I guess take my friend group and expand it and also do some, you know, some organized activities.”

“If somebody has like a job interview and they’re not prepared for it, I’ve seen, brothers like work with them literally all night long to get them prepped for the interview, or be very vulnerable with each other about what’s going on in their lives, have a really good time if we go on a camping trip together or something.” Reed said, “We really just open up to each other in ways that you don’t necessarily see people open up to each other on a regular basis.”



Courtesy of Getty Images

Another fraternity member at WashU, Noah Treviño, is 22-years-old and an Architecture major and a member of Sigma Nu. He rushed Freshmen year and was actively looking for a sense of community, “I went to a boarding school for three years in high school. And I was having trouble finding, I was an athlete in high school also, so I was trying to find kind of a similar community that I had like in a boarding school or on a sports team that I was having trouble finding because I didn’t play sports in college. And I guess, like the closest thing that I could get to that was through Greek life.” Treviño said.

“Yeah, I guess like, most specifically, my freshman year of college, one of my close childhood friends had committed suicide. So I always kind of like struggled around the anniversary of his death. And I remember one time I came to the house, and I was talking to a very close friend from before I joined the fraternity. And I was kind of just venting to him and just kind of just unloading he kind of explained how like, the whole house is like that support system and like they’re there for me and it’s kind of my first realization of like, a way like I just joined a community of people that want me here and care about me? It’s not just like a drinking club?”

“It kind of changed how I moved about the fraternity a bit more. I started to make sure that I was conscious of people’s kind of like emotions and how they were feeling and making sure to check in on my friends and not just focus on like the fun part.”

“Yeah, definitely. I think it’s important to have that space but I also think it’s important to know the difference between like, having a space to talk and be free of judgment in a positive way or a negative way, in a way that’s like harmful to others.”

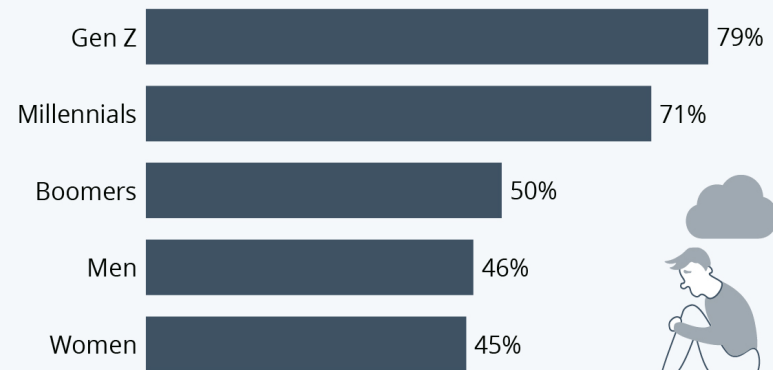
A horrifying extreme instance of where male loneliness can go too far is with incel culture. An extreme example of toxic masculinity and misogyny, the incel, or “involuntarily celibate”, community is composed of mostly heterosexual men who focus on self-pity, misogyny, racism and have a sense of entitlement to sex. The nonprofit organization Southern Poverty Law has categorized incels as a hate group because of the many mass murders associated with this online culture. They state on their website, “Incels, who luxuriate in their hatred of women, found a home for their hate-filled, misogynistic rants.”

A new uncertainty about their place in the world correlates with spiking levels of anxiety and depression in young men. The incel approach is the next logical approach for men and boys who believe that they are entitled to everything, including sex.

## Gen Z Is Lonely

Percent of U.S. adults who are lonely, shown as demographics

61% of all U.S. adults reported feeling lonely, which is up 7% from last year



n=10,441 adults

Survey was conducted during the summer of 2019

Source: Ipsos Polling for Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index



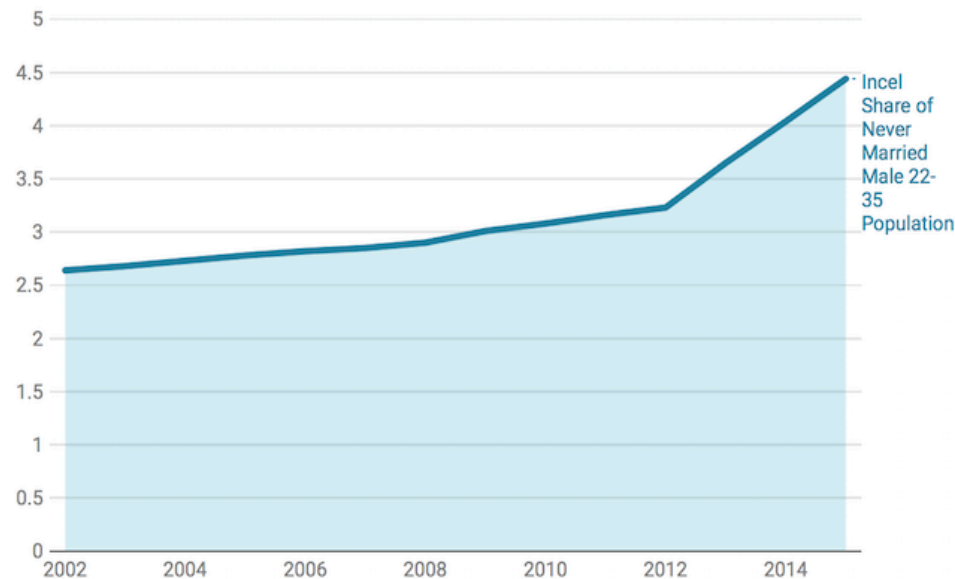
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Alexandra Blair, artist and journalist, has been exploring the alt-right and incel culture long before they became the well-known terms that they are today. Her sister was a member of the sorority house that self-proclaimed incel Elliot Rodgers viciously attacked in the 2014 Isla Vista killings. Thankfully, her sister survived but the ramifications of this attack have deeply impact her sister and family.

A lot of the work that Blair created left her feeling perplexed, “But some of the work is about like how do I reconcile empathizing with a person who tried to kill my sister empathizing with this, quote unquote, incel monster, you know” Blair said “but also, like, what does it mean that I’m trying to empathize with that person? What does it mean that I as a person who didn’t, who wasn’t involved in the event, I’m trying to recreate the event in some way, you know?”

## Incel Share of Never-Married, Male, 22-35 Population

Linear interpolations between NSFG round midpoints, ACS marital demographic shares.



*"Incel" defined as a never-married male between the ages of 22-35 who has never had sex, and whose stated reason for virginity is something besides religion, health, or timing.*

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“And for me, I think that it’s a really inconvenient topic for a lot of people to take seriously. Because I think we all understand that nobody wants to spend time honestly talking about why young white dudes are feeling this way. Right. It’s like, it’s just not your moment. We don’t want we don’t want to talk about this. It’s too inconvenient and weird and according to our paradigm, this shouldn’t be happening. Because of because you’re so privileged, right?” Blair said, “So, it’s just a lot easier to dismiss that stuff, it’s certainly easier to dismiss it than it is to address it seriously and look at the systems, especially when you feel like other people deserve airtime. And other groups deserve serious consideration of their traumas. So, I just think that it’s like a really hard topic to take seriously in a public space.”

Blair believes a solution for this huge problem is not simple but multi-faceted. First, Blair thinks that we first have to take the problem seriously. Blair said, “I think, for starters, and this is a cliché thing to express, but I think for starters, we can take the problem seriously in a way that speaks with it, rather than at it. So, I don’t think it’s necessarily helpful to be dismissive of the situation whether or not in your heart you perceive it as a real pain or it is a valid pain is actually irrelevant.”

Blair’s biggest takeaway from her experience was re-examining how she as an individual approaches mental health and illness, especially in men. She now actively tries to avoid societal tropes and clichés about men, their emotions and how they process them.



Making friends is something that we do not teach boys growing up. They are taught how to pursue a woman for a date, but not to pursue a man to be a friend. Making friends is incredibly important for health. We, especially men, should not have to hide behind shame about not having any friends. It is a natural thing that needs to be addressed before extreme instances occur.

The patriarchy hurts everyone. Empathy, caring, and nurturing are gendered emotions that are associated with the feminine. And, because the feminine in our culture is considered inferior to masculinity, many men will not engage or interact with their emotions. Incel culture is the extreme response to a society and culture that emphasizes sex as crucial and for men to not examine their own biases and emotional wellbeing.

The solution will not be just to teach these men how to find friends or girlfriends, or even just remind them that misogyny will not help, we first must address the disease. So, let's raise boys who don't jump to violence and aggression when confronted with emotions. Let's raise them to be true to themselves. Most importantly, we have to make sure boys don't feel threatened when another boy asks to be friends.