

# Men behaving badly

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When a relationship breaks down, men usually don't cope as well as women. **Lisa Mitchell** examines why.

Last year, 40-year-old Jim Baker bumped into an old school friend on a street corner. They hadn't seen each other for years. "What's happened to you?" his friend asked, disturbed by Baker's manic appearance. It was the blunt greeting that jolted Baker back into reality. While he had been ignoring the telltale signs of his spiral into depression — sweaty palms, dry throat, shortness of breath, a constant, uncontrollable urge to cry — his gnawing desperation was visible to others.

"You need to see a psychiatrist — today," his friend said, and gave Baker a number.

"The guy saved my life. I didn't know how sick I was," says Baker, who contemplated suicide after an unexpected and acrimonious separation from his wife a year earlier.

He felt so humiliated that it was months before he told anyone. He would call his sister but she became so distressed her husband insisted he stop. Instead, Baker turned to crisis-support telephone services and wrote 100,000 words of angst to himself.

"All of a sudden, you can't talk to your wife about the things that are important to you. She made it very clear that I was public enemy number one. (Once married) you don't nurture your relationship with your parents. It's humiliating to have to go back to them when you've done everything you thought was right to build an independent life."

Baker was lucky to get through to Mensline. Since it was launched three years ago, the telephone counselling service has received 190,000 calls (of

which only 37,000 were answered because of a lack of counsellors and funding) — 45 per cent of them from men who cannot make sense of their world after separation. There is no rule book to tell them how to cope with the shock and explosion of emotions they have never felt before, or the fatal blow of losing their children overnight.

"When things stop working, a man feels that he has got up at 6am for the past 15 years to pay the mortgage, get the car, make sure the holidays are paid for, ensure that food is on the table, that the school fees are paid. And what happens then? In my case, you experience disdain at the hands of the person you've built all this with. It's no surprise that a man starts questioning what he's doing and why he's doing it," he says.

Baker was lucky enough to have a good income, which allowed him to spend \$10,000 on counselling and gave him the means to opt out of work for a while.

"Women tend to build the social networks. They're the ones who send the Christmas cards and invite the neighbours in for a drink."  
TERRY MELVIN, director of Mensline

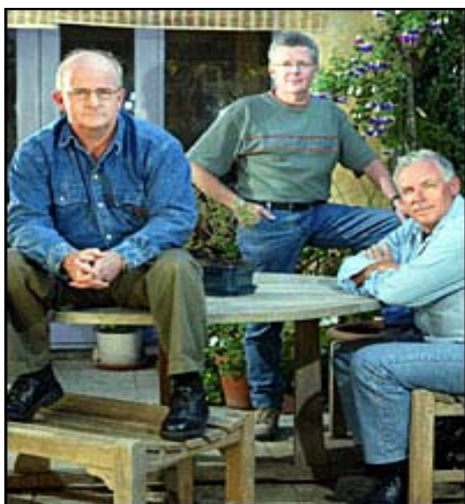
"I've learned that material things in life mean nothing and that if you don't know yourself, then you're in a perilous state because you're just a combination of factors away from a horrifying crash . . .

"If you go to a male in his midlife and say 'Hang on, let's go back to when you were 14, when you should have developed some self-awareness skills and awareness of your (negative) family patterns'.

"If you share with them just how awkward and potentially threatening and time-consuming that is, they're just going to look at you and say 'Sorry, I haven't got time for this, I've got a board meeting in the morning'."

We are in the midst of redefining the modern relationship and while women have acquired more freedom and greater equality, men are struggling to define their new role in the partnership.

Snag, cave man, child-minder or money-maker? The job description has changed. No one told 41-year-old Andrew Thompson, father of three, whose seven-year relationship ended last June. "Since separating, my feeling is that my role was nothing more than a sperm donor and cash cow . . . One of the things I've certainly come to appreciate more, particularly in the past seven months, is the value of family and friends, even neighbours who have asked me to come and have a coffee and chat."



**Friends for life:** Roger Hilton, David Vincent and Bruce Bramhill met at a men's workshop when their marriages broke down.

Men are still not socialised to reach out emotionally in times of stress and often find their social networks have fallen by the wayside by midlife, and particularly after separation. Women tend to build the social networks, says Terry Melvin, manager of Mensline Australia.

"They're the ones who send the Christmas cards and invite the neighbours in for drinks."

Thompson felt particularly isolated because he had moved from interstate. He is on a cheap phone plan to keep in touch with friends but that doesn't replace a wife and three kids.

"I found when I moved to Melbourne and got married, the focus of my life became work and family. Particularly with a young family and building a home, it didn't leave much time to socialise. Time out for me meant solitary pursuits like a run or a cycle."

As Thompson struggles to re-create his fathering role from a distance, he is beginning to wonder if his children might be better off without him. Arranging access has become an emotional nightmare. (Nearly a third of all children living with a natural parent have little or no contact with the other parent.)

It's all such new territory — the lawyers, child-support services, adjusting to living alone, and his once-comfortable financial position have vanished.

"There's very much a feeling of helplessness with dealing with the system, which seems morally unjust . . . Now, any career change I make has to be at least at a certain income level . . .

I brought everything into the relationship, but it means I've marked time for seven years, financially. After tax and child support and health-care and half the expenses for the children, I'm paying about 80 cents in the dollar."

It's a common theme. A man wakes up one day and his wife says two words — "It's over," says Tony Gee, a psychologist at Relationships Australia.

Women initiate divorce 64 per cent of the time, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. They initiate because they are no longer dependent on men to survive, says Gee, but as initiators, women can also prepare themselves, mentally and emotionally, for the break.

Too often, men seem not to notice the warning signs of a relationship going awry, and the abruptness of separation leaves them reeling.

Thompson and Baker's stories echo those of the hundred or so men who have joined the men's separation and parenting group run by Gee.

In the face of such massive change, many will hit "self-destruct" and anaesthetise their pain with alcohol or drugs, or revert to primitive responses such

as rage, even violence, as they lose control over their lives.

Those who choose to work through their issues survive the experience — and future relationships — far better, he says.

"Men are not part of a culture that encourages self-reflection or to externalise stuff. For the guys going through my program, it's a big shift for them to start reflecting on themselves."

David Vincent, Roger Hilton and Bruce Bramhill are three affable men in their 50s. They've moved from handshakes to hugs in the past 15 years and it's a world away from the lives they led before divorce. All three have remarried.

Their friendship began with a Melbourne workshop called Man's Inner Journey, a self-development group that spawned a monthly men's group.

It wasn't until Vincent's second marriage failed after just 15 months that he began to search inwardly for the cause. Through the workshop, they have confronted realities about themselves, their partners and society's perceptions of them that have changed their outlooks on life, and their enjoyment of it, enormously.

"The course gets you going," says Vincent, "but the men's group is about being able to share your feelings on an ongoing basis, because it would be easy to slide back into your old habits . . .

"For me, (the course) was about understanding my patterns of behaviour and being able to understand where the communication broke down . . .

"I learned how to sit down and communicate . . . There was also a lot of self-criticism . . . In picking myself up from that, you learn to forgive yourself and look at what you need to do to change that behaviour."

Hilton and Bramhill talk about the "tools" of the relationships trade that they now use every day. Men's groups, they say, provide a safe and non-judgemental environment within which to use these tools.

They have learned how to build deeper friendships with men and how to recognise and control the emotions that sometimes drive them, rather than acting blindly upon them.

Says Bramhill: "If you realise your reaction is linked to something that happened in the past, you then have control over it. There's more power in acceptance than there is in reaction."

Each night he and his wife, Jill, acknowledge three positive things about themselves and each other. They have made a commitment to self-development and nurturing their relationship.

Hilton recommends Nike's slogan: Just Do It. "If you live and breathe what you learn and if you change, the world changes around you." Up until 1996, Hilton had been a "handshake" rather than "hug" man.

"If you really analyse it, I'm 10 times different to what I was 10 years ago," he says. "Expressing yourself in front of guys? You wouldn't do it. My first time at men's group, I was in so much financial distress and everything else, that when I opened my mouth to say why I was there, I started to cry. I'm whistling down the corridors now. You feel excited to be alive. It's great."

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#### **WHERE TO FIND HELP**

Men's Separation and Parenting program: 9261 8700

Man's Inner Journey: [www.mansinnerjourney.com](http://www.mansinnerjourney.com)

Man's Inner Journey Men's Group:

- David Mallard, 0408 549 092,
- David Vincent, 0414 242 228, or
- Roger Hilton, 0411 040 554

Mensline Australia crisis support: 1300 789 978

Some names in this story have been changed