

Do We Raise Boys To Be Lousy Husbands?

Men are being found wanting by their women

There are over 50,000 legal separations in Australia each year. It is estimated that women initiate approximately 70% of these. Many men are taken by surprise. They fail to recognise that their relationship is in trouble or they fail to act and address their partner's concerns. What we hear on the Mensline each day are stories from men who are bemused, confused and bewildered. They thought they were doing a good job as a husband, father, and breadwinner.

Measured against the criteria they are carrying in their head, they probably are doing a "good job". However, it may not be what the woman wants and what is required to sustain a health relationship in the 21 century. Over the last 20-30 years, the role of women – wife, mother, worker - has radically changed. Women are demanding very different things from their husbands and partners. As Terrence Real, a US based psychotherapist and relationship counsellor says: women are *"for the first time in history, insisting on real emotional intimacy in their marriages. And men are coming up short"* (p 38).

This is not to say, as is often imputed to men that we don't care about their relationships. If we look at the real distress separation causes many of us and the way we manage that experience so poorly, relationships mean a great deal for us.

Changing job descriptions

The problem for us men, according to Real, is that our job description has changed and we are no longer skilled to function in the new roles of husbands, fathers or lovers.

He goes on to add: *"We can't blame each of these men individually.... Men's job description has changed – and men are unprepared for the change. We don't raise, nor have we ever raised, boys and men to be intimate partners, but to be strong, competitive performers. The pressure to be hard, logical, independent and stoic all too often sets men up to be emotionally distant, arrogant, numb to their own feelings and unconcerned about everyone else's, as well contemptuous of vulnerability and weakness."*

These aren't pathological aberrations; they're the defining characteristics of manhood in our culture. The very values and traits instilled in us as boys – whether we want them or not – ensure that we'll become lousy husbands.” (p 38)

Traditional masculine ways of relating is a health hazard.

This problems identified by Real, is now support by a growing body of evidence that the way we are raised as boys into manhood is detrimental no only for our relationships with women, but for our relationships with other men and ourselves. When we rigidly adhere to the traditional characteristics of masculinity, we are more likely to experience mental health difficulties. These include depression and anxiety, finding ourselves socially isolated, at risk of suicide or self-harming behaviour, not asking for help when it is needed and having difficulty developing and sustaining intimate relationships.

One consequence of this adherence to traditional masculinity is the inability to identify and express our feelings (Alexithymia). Many of us are raised with a very limited emotional vocabulary. This does not mean that we do not feel. In fact, we feel as deeply as women. However, social conditioning often leads to the repression of our emotional life and its expression. Such feeling as hurt, sadness, pain, shame, care are a no go area because to express these is to show vulnerability. Other the other hand, feeling such as anger, frustration, aggression are legitimate and are important tools in a competitive environment. An inability to express feelings freely can often lead to feeling overwhelmed by emotion (flooding). This may explain why many of us withdraw into the caves or sheds or erupt with violence or aggression.

Men have different experiences of intimacy

We experience and express intimacy differently than women. The prevailing view is that the only legitimate expression of intimacy is the face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball, spill-your-guts type intimacy. We are not trained in this school of intimacy. We are doers and problem solvers. We see the world as objects and things and our conversation is about anything but the personal. We are not broken, but come from a different world.

Bernie Zibergeld, another US psychologist who works with men says that men often express intimacy in what he calls side-by-side intimacy. Two men under the bonnet of a car may have a real experience of closeness and bonding. The husband who brings home the bacon, fixes the tap, cooks the barbecue is expressing his love and care for his partner or family.

In the prevailing culture, our ways of being and relating are often overlooked or diminished. The challenge for us is to learn the steps to a new way of being in relationship. This, as Real says, *“is like learning a second language”*. Moreover, *it is about developing an awareness of how “mainstream culture rewards compliance to traditional roles. Grandiose men and accommodating women are often ‘successful’ by the world’s standards, even while their relationships are miserable.”* (p 58)

Meeting in truth and love

The space where two overlapping circles meet is called a mandorla. It is the sacred space often seen in medieval design where the saint or the divine resides. It is the space where couples truly encounter one another and growth occurs. A true learning environment as with true intimacy requires the presence of truth and love and the absence of shame and blame.

While women can extend the invitation to men to learn this second language, both are required move out of the confining values and expectations of traditional masculinity and femininity. But this must be done in a way that is respectful of what both contribute, while acknowledging the ways they as wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, might collude in a system that continues to disadvantage boys in their journey to manhood. *“It’s time for men and women of good faith to join in the understanding that this traditional arrangement harms both sexes and compromises the union between them”* (Real,T (2002), *Awful Truth*, Psychotherapy Networker)
