

## **Basements, Video Games, and Isolation**

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On March 2, the government of Canada announced that the Health Policy Branch is soliciting input from people across the nation to inform the development of a "Men and Boys' Health Strategy." The stated goal is to create "supportive and safe environments, for all ages, to seek help when they need it." Much of the following data and information comes directly from their website.

Young men are in crisis - from their teens through their 30s, young men are experiencing higher rates of suicide, depression, anxiety, and mental health concerns. Seventeen percent of young men live at home with their parents, not seeking relationships, employment, or education. Essentially, they've withdrawn from life.

Young men report declining levels of mental health, increasing rates of mood disorders, depression, and higher anxiety. The rates go even higher for young men who are unemployed, out of school, or not engaged in job training. They are struggling to find meaning, purpose, and direction.

Young men report they're using more legal and non-legal substances to deal with life's challenges. When on-line gambling became available, the rate of calls to gambling addiction hotlines increased exponentially as young men became involved in sports betting, poker games, casino games, etc. They are racking up unbelievable debt. It's another form of corporate developed and encouraged addiction.

Overall, statistics show that men bear a greater burden than women in relation to their health status, and that their problems start long before they reach adulthood. Men are impacted more often by suicide and premature death, are more prone to abuse substances, be affected by violence, be incarcerated, be homeless, and to suffer more chronic diseases, like diabetes and heart disease.

On the other hand, men are less likely to contact their physician, pursue screening, or practice preventative care. 65% wait over six days to report and treat their symptoms. The Health Strategy hopes to improve outreach and education to address men's concern about the stigma of asking for help so that they are more comfortable with seeking care, for both their mental and physical well-being.

It might seem convenient to dismiss these concerns by pointing to the individual's lifestyle choices as the real problem. Our culture has a strong bias for blaming the individual when that person does not or cannot meet societal expectations. We're encouraged to see challenges as uniquely personal, instead of expecting accountability

in the larger society for such things as exposure to harmful chemicals or dangerous work conditions, inequitable employment practices, systemic bias, inadequate housing and nutrition, corporate malfeasance, and so much more.

Yet, the evidence continues to grow that social, economic, and cultural factors shape health outcomes, for both men and women. Gender and other social determinants impact men's and women's risk for and outcome of health challenges. For men, the focus of today's sermon, some of the contributing factors are: lower education levels, higher rates of incarceration and homelessness, work exposure to high-risk activities, stigma and peer pressure to be "a man", and so forth. Other factors we know influence wellness and health include systemic racism, colonialism, economic inequality, and discrimination for men who are Indigenous, black or from other racialized groups, or part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Let's focus on young men. We cannot minimize the impact of video games, social media, and the vast access to information, porn, podcasts, and websites that can be used to support one's particular bias or encourage one to adopt a story about why life is treating you badly. Housing costs, difficulty getting a job that offers a living wage, the rise in food, rent, and other necessities, a world in seeming chaos, the withdrawal from a diverse and engaging social life outside of online activities, feeling a lack of purpose and meaning in life, media "role models" for young men that equate masculinity with being tough, surrounded by beautiful women, having vast sums of money for gold jewelry, expensive cars, high-end living, and fame...the list is long and pressure is real.

Young men are taking it in, sending it all through the still immature circuits of their brains, and, getting angrier and more resentful, confused about their lives and more hopeless about their future. Will they ever get a job? Find a relationship? Be able to afford a home? Can they ever have a life? There's a spectrum of responses, from mildly depressed or discouraged to those who bounce into the extremes of suicide or identifying with incels - the involuntarily celebrate - who blame women for their unsatisfactory lives, the many woes of the world, and the lack of opportunity they feel.

As a matter of fact, young men frequently blame women for the rising challenges of their lives. And there are numerous on-line forums, podcasters, and influencers who encourage this line of thinking. Specifically, they point to the rise of feminism, which in their view, disrupted the historical balance of power between men and women and put women "on top." Young men increasingly express contempt for women, endorse misogyny, and suggest that the world would be made "right again" if only women could be relegated to "traditional" roles that are subservient to men.

The goal of feminism is NOT to make women into men, or to advantage women at the expense of men. It is to allow women to enjoy full personhood, to be equitable with men, to address the historical advantage white males have had for centuries. Equity

isn't pie - if I get a bigger piece, it doesn't mean you get a smaller piece or none of the pie. We can share equitably, but it will take a sincere effort and extensive dialog to move us further in that direction. Men have had so much advantage, power, and control for so many years, couldn't we just share a little and allow women to be treated like humans? This proposition that this might become a reality has seemingly scared the shit out of many men.

If we want to create a just and equitable world, as our UU Principles state and we say we encourage, we need to stop throwing women under the bus and blaming them for men's woes and society's ills. After years of the patriarchy, we have an obligation to create equal opportunities for women all over the world, not just in Northern Europe and North America. I'm afraid the term "feminism" has become a convenient focus for men's frustration, anger, and resentment. It's easier to blame women and keep being angry than it is to confront the social and cultural norms of the past, identify legislation or cultural and personal changes that will move the needle on equality, and stop reinforcing outdated stereotypes about what it means to be a man or a woman or person.

There are many factors within our culture that impact the well-being of adults and children: overwork, emphasizing financial and material gain, focusing on technological devices, apps, and information, school overcrowding and underfunding, addictions, limited resources for mental and physical health care, and so forth. We are constantly confronted with a multitude of ways to be distracted, diverted, and disengaged. Men and women, boys and girls, people across the spectrum of humanity are suffering.

As a culture, we need to stop pathologizing the behavior and character of men and boys. They're loud, they can't sit still, they like sports and hunting, they act immature...Men's traditional roles include providing for the financial and physical needs of the family and community, protecting those who are weaker by providing security and stability, and procreating to continue the family/community population. Provider - Protector - Procreator.

Today, these traditional roles are being reconsidered and we're leaning into new ways to express these duties in ways that allow both men and women greater flexibility in their lives. In addition to strength, courage, and leadership, we're adding more modern concepts to what it means to be a man - having emotional intelligence, expressing empathy, sharing the emotional and physical work of being a family. Changing the bonds that subjugated women results in changes to the bonds that have held men captive, as well.

For millennia, we've asked men to behave in certain culturally specific ways. For example: grief: In Hamlet, Shakespeare has Claudius - Hamlet's step-father - reproach him for expressing "unmanly" grief after the death of his father, the King. Claudius

suggests Hamlet forget it and move on. Our culturally accepted appropriate behavior for men has been around a long time. No vulnerability, no emotional expression (except anger), no sensitivity. These qualities are associated with femininity and that's BAD.

Men are expected to be tough, to avoid being humiliated by being seen as a "sissy" or doing things that might indicate one is homosexual. This has led men to avoid close, tactile, platonic friendships with other men. To fear intimacy with other men, and often, with women, as well, even with those they say they love.

Many young men feel a sense of exclusion, isolation, and confusion regarding their role in modern society. While they yearn for respect, emotional safety, meaning, and belonging, instead they have become disillusioned and disappointed. Their choice is to disengage from the challenge of the chaos and change around them, to avoid confronting work, education, social expectations, relationships, or exploring what they could do to change their lives for the better. It becomes easier to remain in the basement, engaged in endless rounds of video games, online pleasure seeking, and insulated from the things that confuse, frustrate, or overwhelm you.

Two authors figure prominently in the discussion of the lives of young men and sharing strategies to help turn lives around while shaping society in new and healthier models. Scott Galloway, who wrote *Notes on Being a Man*, is an entrepreneur and marketing professor at New York University's Stern School of Business and Richard Reeves, whose book is titled *Of Boys and Men*, is the president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, suggest the following for supporting those they call "Lost Boys" -

1. Work to remove the shame and stigma from men who work as teachers and educators. We need MORE men teaching in the early grades, to help young boys see positive role models of men and socially appropriate male behavior. Get more men into volunteering in coaching, leading groups for young men in churches and clubs, leading scouting-type groups, being volunteers as "Big Brothers". Young men need adult role models and the guidance and input of elders to move more effectively into their own maturity.
2. Advocate for support of men and boys' mental health resources. Help reduce the stigma of seeking help by sharing one's own experience, by pointing out alternative ways for boys to behave outside of stereotypical male behavioural scripts.
3. Establish and support male mentoring programs so that young men can benefit from having someone to talk to, ask questions, be guided and encouraged to help them know how to live life in this system. Reward them for expressing feelings, being sensitive, crying or being vulnerable. Volunteer to be a mentor to a young man.

4. Get more boys involved in sports. Sweating is good for young men - for all men, really - as a way to learn about teamwork, winning and losing, doing your best, putting in the effort. Help them celebrate their strength.

5. Get them away from their screens. Encourage engagement with life outside the house/basement. Expect them to volunteer to learn about their responsibility to the community. Get them into a small job that helps prepare them for a bigger job. Help them realize that the community needs them.

Galloway states that if we want better men, we have to be willing to put in the effort to create better men, by helping our boys learn about "mature masculinity" - feeling a sense of purpose, accountability to a community, and a plan to move toward the future with confidence and the skills to handle real life and its challenges. We have to provide more guidance for them to become protectors, providers, and relationship/family creators.

It is important to help our young people know that they're needed and wanted in their families, their communities, and the larger world. Work with them to help them identify their talents and skills, so that they can work to develop in those areas and then offer their energy and ability to the world. Help counter the media and societal models that reinforce that the only "good" life is one of acquisition, huge sums of money, working long hours or accumulating titles or awards for putting in relentless hard work. Help them learn about the value of internal satisfaction and personal validation, reinforced by the love and respect of their friends and family. Let them know that there are many ways to be a "real man". Expose them to beauty, nature, animals, and plants - help them understand their part in the interconnected web.

Despite current efforts on the political front that seem to want to return us to an earlier age, ultimately we are moving toward the future, not a return to some idolized version of the 1950s. Many of us will not live to see that world, but we have an obligation and a mandate to help prepare our young people - both boys and girls - to be able to fully participate in the world they create and inhabit.

So may it be.