

The New Manhood
Steve Biddulph
Chapter One

The problem

‘Have you seen the look in the eye of a 35-year-old man?’

Robert Bly

The problem can be put very simply. Most men don't have a life. What we call our life is mostly just a big act, a mask that we clamp onto our faces each morning and don't take off until we fall asleep at night. Most men are flat out every day living a lie. We've all grown so used to this, we don't even notice it any more.

It wasn't always like this. Throughout history, men have needed to 'act tough' at times, but they could also drop the act, so as to love, laugh and be close; feel grief and build friendship. Today the mask stays put, and behind it is often a confused, scared figure. Most men spend their whole lives pretending that they're fine when they're not. Pretending, and having a life, are very different things.

The problem starts early. Usually in his mid-teens, confronted with the problem of 'becoming a man', a boy tries on several of the stock male masks on offer – cool dude, hard worker, good bloke, tough guy, or 'sensitive new man'. He decides which one will work best in his social world of family, school and street. The mask usually has a fixed, wooden smile. 'It's cool.' 'I'm fine.' The process is mostly unconscious; a boy may have only the vaguest idea that he is doing it. And since every other boy around him is doing it too, it feels totally normal.

Masks have a purpose: they prevent vulnerability and exposure – important if you are not sure who you are or what you are allowed to feel. Nobody can hurt you in there. If they can't see the real you, they can't laugh at you, reject you or judge you. You can 'play the game'. But this pretending has a cost: hidden away, not really showing anyone our real self, it gets very lonely. Parents sense with sadness the boy shutting himself away. Friends, potential girlfriends, older adults who might have been of help sense a brick wall going up, and pull back. But the one who suffers most is the boy-becoming-man himself. The mask becomes a lifelong obstacle to healing and love.

Most women are not like this. Spend just a few hours in the company of women (especially women who have lived a little) and you will find that they are more real and more alive than men. There is a sense of inner feeling and spirit that bubbles out in the way they talk, move and laugh. Women have their problems, but most women at least act from a clear sense of self. Women generally know who they are and what they want.

How did this difference come about? Little kids of both sexes start out well enough: it's a child's nature to be open-hearted, expecting to be happy, expecting life to be an adventure. That's why small children are so delightful to be around. But early on, a young boy's spirit begins to shrivel. By school age he is already becoming stiff and ill at ease; by the teen years, unhappiness is mapped into every muscle of his body. By the time he is a grown man, he is like a tiger raised in a zoo – prowling about,

confused and numb, with huge energies untapped. He feels that there must be more, but he does not know what that 'more' is. So he spends his life pretending – to his friends, his family, and himself – that everything is fine.

The cracks appear

Round-the-clock pretending is hard work, so it's not surprising that, sooner or later, cracks start to appear in a man's façade. Sometimes they arise through getting a glimpse of what could be; a man finds himself alone in nature, in the surf or the landscape at sunset, and he feels a blissful connection with the ocean, trees and sky. Or he experiences a certain kind of moment with a woman, of passionate intensity or tender closeness. Or playing with his children, he suddenly feels like a child himself, tingling with life. He glimpses something, unsettling but beautiful ... and then it's gone. He cannot get that feeling back. He goes back to business as usual, but it has shaken him. He knows that something is missing from his life.

Sometimes the cracks are more sudden. If a man is very good at denying his true feelings, the tensions may build up unseen over many years. Then one day, like pressure that has built up deep in the earth, the fault-line suddenly gives way. Then the damage is rapid and severe – a sudden health breakdown, a humiliating career failure that shows all the signs of self-sabotage, a shocking car accident for which he is clearly to blame ...

More often, though, there is not even the buzz of drama, but merely a creeping despair. A man begins to suspect (often wrongly) that he is not loved by those around him; to realise (often rightly) that he is not even known by them. His connection to his own life suddenly hangs by the thinnest of threads.

Needed: liberation for the rest of us

For the 20 years from the 1970s until the 1990s, the focus of my profession, psychology, was on helping women. It was the same in teaching, social work, health. Women were breaking out of narrow, crippling roles and restrictions. Anyone with a sense of fair play got on board with this. The changes were historic – in sexuality, career, education, family roles – the whole shape of a woman's life was transformed. It was an exciting time. But gradually it dawned on some of us that this story was incomplete. That men too were often caught in traps not of their own making. That just because men were 'on top' in jobs, earnings, and many outward measures of power, this didn't necessarily make them winners in any sense of the word. So we began to look more closely at men.

What we found was startling. There was clear evidence (see the box) that all through the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, men had risk factors all their own. Suicide, premature death, accidents and addictions – the statistics were all dominated by men. And hurt men also tended to hurt others: physical violence against spouses, child sexual abuse, divorce and moral bankruptcy in business and politics all pointed to something badly wrong with large numbers of men. School shootings, serial killings: men, always men. As Robert Bly said at the start of his famous book, *Iron John*, 'Are you depressed enough already?'

The big question was, are malfunctioning men – from serial killers to prime ministers and presidents – just the exceptions? Or is there a flaw in the whole weave, causing *all* men to be so loosely connected to life that they risk floating off into oblivion. Do we need to start again, in the way we raise little boys, nurture teenagers, and support the lives of young men? Do we have to change men's lives as much as we had to change women's? The answer is yes, of course.

Facing the facts

Here are some of the facts about being a man today:

- Men, on average, live for six years less than women do. They also have higher death rates in every age category, 'from womb to tomb'.
- Men routinely fail at close relationships. (Just two indicators: over 40 percent of marriages break down, and divorces are initiated by the woman in four out of five cases.)
- Over 90 percent of acts of violence are carried out by men, and 70 percent of the victims are men.
- In school, around 90 percent of children with behaviour problems are boys, and over 85 percent of children with learning problems are also boys.
- Young men (aged from fifteen to 25) have three times the death rate of young women, and these deaths are all from preventable causes – motor-vehicle accidents being the greatest.
- Men make up 80 percent of the homeless.
- Men comprise over 90 percent of gaol populations.
- The leading cause of death among men between fifteen and 44 is self-inflicted death.

Mental health, physical health and mortality – men win the prize in every category. Just being male is the biggest risk factor of all.

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