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[Home](#) > How to Make Masculinity Stop Hurting

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[Health](#) [1] : [Education](#) [2], [Lifestyle](#) [3] : [Sex and Gender](#) [4]

HOW TO MAKE MASCULINITY STOP HURTING

by [Sinclair Sexsmith](#) [5], November 11th, 2009 at 2:08pm
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How to Make Masculinity Stop Hurting



Radical Masculinity by Sinclair Sexsmith

My dad's best friend died last week. Heart attack. He was 60, barely older than my dad, not old enough for his heart to give way. They've been friends for 35 years, longer than I've been alive. I got a heartbreaking email from my father about how they met, where they'd traveled together, and his favorite joke (What did the Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor? Make me one with everything).

In his eulogy, [his son wrote](#) [6] that he was "a devoted family man, one who extended the term to cover a great many individuals, supporting and caring for those who needed him."

And I thought, *that's radical masculinity.*

How does one learn how to be that? How do

Traditional, limitational

you grow up into a masculinity, a maleness, an adult manhood, despite this culture's obsession with bad boys and lunkheads, to be a caring protective provider, to make effective, positive changes in this world, to build something that will last, to be generous with your heart and mind and love and time?

Traditional, limitational masculinity says *don't talk about your feelings*. That masculinity says *be strong all the time*. It says a "real" man is tough, and the worst thing you can be is a sissy, a pussy, a girl, feminine, weak.

masculinity says "Don't talk about your feelings." That masculinity says "Be strong all the time." It says "A 'real' man is tough, and "The worst thing you can be is a sissy, a pussy, a girl, feminine, weak." Radical masculinity says: *I am listening. Who do you want to be?*

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There is no shortage of research and writings on the pain of being socialized into a gender role in western cultures. In this GI Joe society, where the most common toys for little boys are guns and tanks and trucks, where the constant credo of "big boys don't cry!" echoes in all of our ears, despite our sex, despite our progressive parents, we cut our teeth on the masculinity that confines and withholds and withdraws basic human emotional experiences, denying they even exist, ruling that anything not invulnerable and impenetrable is weak, girly, or inappropriate for a "real man."

I know these men. I grew up with these men as role models. I saw the painful results of this stoicism. I knew I didn't want to be a part of that, but I didn't know if I had another choice.

There are some real, beneficial functions for this mode of masculinity: to provide for a family, to keep those one loves safe from harm, to be the structure around which others can build and formulate and grow and change, to be part of a historic lineage, to fit in, to be commended for one's strength. But this kind of masculinity is too rigid to allow for the kind of growth needed in this fast-paced, information society where anyone can become anything, where we have more access to systems of power like government, education, and technology, than ever before. This outdated masculinity holds us back. This masculinity is keeping a fist-tight grip on the past, on some sort of idealized, unobtainable version of "man" which is more of a figment of our collective subconscious than a nostalgia for how society used to be.

And now, forty years after the second wave of feminism blazed new freeways for women's rights, masculinity needs to turn itself inside out in order to bring us as a collective whole to our next stage of human well-being.

This same tool that has blazed the way for women can be used for men and masculinity, too—feminism is a powerful gateway to gender theory, to breaking down the expectations placed on people because of their gender.

But as I attempt to bridge this gap between masculinity studies and feminism more and more, I've run into some men who have resistance. What about the ways feminism rejects men and men's experiences? What about the ways feminism polices gender, going so far as to claim that "gender causes oppression," so therefore we should reject all gender

always?

But me, I *like* gender. I think it feels good to get dolled up and use my physical presentation as a way to communicate with lovers and friends and communities and society. I like the way my masculinity does not necessarily line up with my breasts or my female pronouns, asking those who interact with me to challenge their preconceived notion of what it is to be a woman.

As women have more and more rights to cross over into traditionally male domains, men's roles have become less clear, less rigid, and, some would say, threatened. Those who attempt to use feminism as a way to talk about how masculinity operates in the world can end up with the twisted result of blaming feminism for the feelings about masculinity that become uncovered and speakable.

I can see this process clearly: the discussion of what it's like to become a man, to be a boy, in the world, and the revelations of expectations, strength, and toughness that have explanations and even a source: masculinity. Suddenly, the student is left holding a bucket of rage, shame, emotion, privilege, and limitation—who wouldn't want to just give the bucket back instead of pulling out the contents one by one?

Recently, I talked to a guy who said: "I teach teenaged boys, and when we talk about feminism, a lot of complicated feelings come up around masculinity—shame, rage, frustration, inadequacy, trauma. The boys have the tendency to blame feminism, since they weren't articulating those feelings before."

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The problem is, feminism did not create those complicated feelings. They were already there,

clinging to our shadows as we go along obliviously but futilely attempting to be self-aware and productive. Feminism just provides the bucket in which these things rest, a structure to hold them, a way to get a good look at them without them squirming away and out of grasp.

As much as I go to bat for feminism's inclusivity, and the ways we can use feminism in furthering radical masculinity, most definitions of the term feminism read something like this:

- 1: The theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
- 2: Organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. (Merriam-Webster [7])

The specific focus on women and the often-discounted experiences of men based on gendered expectations and roles have often discouraged men—and other masculine people—from contributing to feminism as a social movement.

Though I feel very strongly that there is a place in feminism for these experiences and for all of us to be included, I understand the qualms and hesitations. I've fought with feminists about the inclusion of queers, trans folks, butches like me who like masculinity, or men themselves. And I firmly stand my ground: I don't care if you say you won't let me in. I understand what this movement is trying to do: examine gender and the ways it hurts. I want to be involved in that. We may disagree on the means by which we achieve that goal, but there is room for me in this revolution, in this re-visioning of what gender means. There must be. There is room for *everyone* in that revolution; otherwise, it will not be very far-reaching, and thus not very revolutionary, will it?

Feminism has taught me all about deconstructing gender roles for both men and women, which are restrictive and limiting, dictating which professions, which hobbies, which alcoholic drinks, which clothing, even which foods are appropriate for our gender. These restrictions and limitations are often very painful, preventing us—men and women and genderqueers and those of us who reject gender and all of us—from pursuing our real dreams, from finding our true selves and letting them shine.

These restrictions and limitations on us based on who we are expected to be are *painful*. This is one of my basic premises of gender roles: they hurt. They squash us, little by little. Culture keeps our gender in line constantly—be it our families, friends, bartenders, coworkers, or complete strangers, someone is always watching what we do and telling us whether or not it lines up with their gendered expectations of us. Our gender is policed by others, deeply, so deeply that we internalize it and police ourselves.

There are many publications, professors, analysts, blogs, writers, and thinkers who tear gendered presentation, expectation, and performance apart and discuss popular events, media, and culture in terms of feminism—but almost all of them focus on women's experiences, trials, and tribulations. And while the analysis and deconstruction of what *women* are expected to do, how women are expected to behave, and the limitations on the gender roles of women have been extremely analyzed in the past forty years, the gendered expectations of men have not yet been comparably deconstructed and brought to light.

Sure, there are many, many writers and thinkers and theorists who are doing studies of masculinity, but that has not yet trickled down to pop culture and everyman the same way feminism has. It has been completely necessary that women rise up and claim power in new ways, especially given the long history of women's subordination, marginalization, and enslavement, through institutions like marriage and systematic noninclusion in things like education and professions. But that doesn't mean that men aren't also stuck in this system, or that men aren't also affected by their limited gender role. And as women's gender roles have changed significantly, so must men and masculinity in response.

Clearly, it has not yet, because feelings like shame, rage, and frustration come up when analyzing masculinity. There are deep-seated inadequacies built into modern masculinity; the expectations of provision, stoicism, and brute force set up just about everyone to fail.

But these feelings are not caused by feminism, or the study of gender itself: these feelings have been there all along. Studying gender simply gives language and words and concepts and analysis to experiences which have been there, in operation, all along. Restrictions on oneself based on gender are not new; undoing that limitation moves at a snail's pace, taking decades or perhaps generations to implement and rebuild. It is

essential to go through the deconstruction, through the analysis, to learn the concepts and words and language in order to move into a new occupation of gender that is no longer painful, no longer stinging whenever we are on the subway or interacting with our bosses or on a date or talking to our mothers, but rather celebratory, a gendered dynamic which is full of communication with others, full of desire, sexually freeing, open-hearted and true, letting our radiance come shining through our every interaction. If we keep going through the deconstruction for long enough, we will find the healing, then the construction, to reach the rebuilding, the fixing, the health—reaching a masculinity that is no longer painful.

What does that look like? What are examples of positive radical masculinity for today's young men? How do you grow up into a masculinity, a maleness, an adult manhood, to be a caring protective provider, to make effective, positive changes in this world, to build something that will last, to be generous with your heart and mind and love and time?

These are the questions I chew on every day. I rest on thoughts like, *as within, so without*, and *the personal is political*, knowing that I can't change the men on TV or in magazines, but I can be cautious and intentional about what I embody and internalize, I can, to some degree, choose and control how I present, I can choose what I consume, and I celebrate radical masculinity when I see it.

Like Mark's eulogy. Like the thirty-five year friendship between him and my dad that I've partially witnessed. His eulogy also included that he was "the inventor of the slotted screwdriver, could fly, and was one of the original signatories to the Declaration of Independence." If I listen close, after reading that line, I can hear his very distinct chuckle, and see his warm grin, and I know he would've loved every word.

Comments

Masculinity

by Roland Hulme on November 11th, 2009 at 2:37pm.

Hi Sinclair - this was a fascinating and brilliantly-written article.

I certainly never viewed masculinity as being about being a 'lughead' or 'bad boy.' I've come from a fairly old-fashioned, conservative upbringing and I've definitely - always - been under the impression that the truest and surest test of masculinity was being a dependable, caring provider and family man. One of the things I was taught to admire most about my own father was the fact that he went 9-5 to the office for 30 years to provide for his family - and took the time to teach us suitably 'manly' things in rest of the time - which extended from shooting and riding (cliched masculine pursuits) to history, classical music and art (definitely not.)

I mean, maybe my experience of masculinity is different - I'm British and from a fairly privileged background - but I think it's harder to define especially when you look beyond just North American views of it.

I was fascinated to read what you wrote about men's reaction to feminism, though - and I

think you're spot on with your appraisal. Right at this moment I'm going through a deep frustration with some aspects of feminist dogma and I'm interested to consider that maybe my 'rage' is somewhat misplaced. Men, in general, do have a deep insecurity and one of the challenging this about feminism is it's easy to think that elevating the rights and power of women somehow diminishes the rights and power of man. I'm now wondering if this is why it's so threatening to men (including, to a certain extent, myself.)

Then again, sometimes I go to a website like Feministing and read articles that just make me think: "This writer doesn't understand men AT ALL." It's SO easy to make generalizations about gender - on both sides.

Brilliant, brilliant article. Thanks for sharing it with us.

Radical Masculinity?

by Ken (not verified) on November 11th, 2009 at 5:04pm.

There's nothing radical about being simply who I am as a man. Yes, I do enjoy feeling masculine, but better still, feeling whole and complete. Too many hetero men find wholeness only in coupling with a woman who can embrace and hold the man's feelings for him. That's not wholeness in my experience. Too many men try desperately to fit the mold of the "all american male" which is pure bull shit and everyone suffers for it. When a man finally enters into midlife, he begins to reassess his beliefs and his own sexuality, if he has the courage to do so and not go into denial or rage or bitterness.

What does it mean to be masculine? It means being one's self, being able to adapt to circumstances, having the skills to tap into both the yin and the yang and enjoying the ride. It is an essential to be nurturing, having the balls to be emotionally available and literate, to be protective without being enmeshing or domineering, to simply be a well balanced human being. Cultural stereotypes of what it means to be masculine are self-destructive as many, if not most, boys know in relating to their fathers. Being masculine to me means being grounded and balanced, as being feminine means being balanced and grounded. No difference whatsoever...outside of genitalia.

The man who is overly macho is denying his own vulnerability and trying to hide it, and becomes "stupid". The woman who decides to prove herself through aggression just becomes being a 'bitch'. Both extremes are not healthy for anyone. So, a man can be masculine....strong, intelligent, thrusting forward, and a woman can also be strong, intelligent, thrusting forward. Each exhibits the masculine and feminine differently based on our personalities and being authentic to who we are, always willing and able to change for the better....more loving, more caring, more tender. Those, to me, are very strong qualities.

The fear of homophobia and the sexism of heterosexism have a devastating hold on this society. We are all suffering for it. And, both men and women have the responsibility to break that cycle.

Nothing doing nothing

by wildthing (not verified) on November 11th, 2009 at 5:46pm.

Well he might also have said "make me one with nothing on it" and the vendor might have said Nothing Doing!!!

or maybe he said well said!!

Really excellent Sinclair, a

by [Felixosaurus](#) ^[8] (not verified) on November 12th, 2009 at 2:30am.

Really excellent Sinclair, a beautifully thoughtful exploration of identities and the relationships that shape them. A real pleasure to read.

Blokey-blokey

by Stephen (not verified) on November 12th, 2009 at 4:03pm.

Great article! I've been thinking a lot about this kind of stuff myself lately - especially since I had to spend time with my father in rural Ireland and realised I had little or nothing to add to any conversation about the 'normal' male stuff out there (football, cars, machinery of all kinds, building, farming, fishing, etc, etc.) - not so much a problem with the aul fella, but certainly the other country alpha-male types treat me as if I was some kind of girly-man, or just an idiot. Meanwhile, I, as a city boy through and through, regard them as backward, ignorant, etc. so I guess it balances out ... I also noticed a kind of desperate need to seem authoritative about almost everything, talking down to the womenfolk (and me!), as if this was the only way to preserve the essence of manhood, which generally manifests itself as utter bullshit and faux knowledge culled from some bloke in the pub presented as Absolute Truth and Ultimate Wisdom, impervious to argument and uncontradictable.

Gawd, I even catch myself doing that sometimes, too (rather more often than I would like). I wonder, is that borne out of insecurity or is it just a standard male trait, something to do with the male brain being more trivia- and information-oriented? Or is that also mere bullshit?

From there to the paranoid theory: I've come to think of the whole male stereotype as the other side of the enslavement of humankind by self-interested elites. Women became the weaker sex, even property, whose opinions and thoughts were worthless, while men were given free reign to dominate them. This seems like a pretty good deal for men at first, but it's really just a mechanism of self-policing and maintaining the status quo - from which only a very few people profit. Men are told they have total authority in the home, by religious types and others, which means we're all top dog in a way, so we're content not to pursue anything more (like genuine equality, social justice, blahdeblah, from which a Utopian future might spring in which nettles might taste like strawberries and rain is chocolate milk). Feminism fucked that up - in a good way - and now it's like men are scrabbling to catch up, or figure out what the fuck just happened.

Sigh. I'm sure it won't be long before the Illuminati and the NWO give us new boxes to

inhabit. Eek! Did I just say that? Er, I mean, all hail the Lizard Overlords! (Phew!)

I've talked about this very

by [virginiaplain](#) ^[9] on November 14th, 2009 at 7:10pm.

I've talked about this very thing to some friends before. I always said I would hate to be a guy, because they have to live with the narrow definition of what 'a real man' is. Thank you for saying it all far more eloquently.

Thanks

by Ken (not verified) on November 14th, 2009 at 7:18pm.

Thanks, virginiaplain. You women have it easy! lol Seriously, though, most men recognize the fluidity of their sexuality, but just can't admit it to another man, let alone a woman. I find men coming to me because they say they feel "safe" with me. Women too are trained to accept the given order of things and, hence, they pass it onto their sons. Somehow this cycle of shame, guilt, and rigidity has to end. That's why too, I believe, it's important for women and men to bond in changing the system in this country.

I couldn't agree with you

by virginiaplain on November 14th, 2009 at 9:08pm.

I couldn't agree with you more, Ken and thank you for your reply! I certainly meant that these definitions of gender are too rigid - and from what I've seen and experienced in my own life, considerably worse for men. I've seen both male and female suffer simply because their individual identities don't match what's in the rulebook.

Male Conformity and Freedom

by Ken (not verified) on November 15th, 2009 at 8:57am.

Ah, yes, Virginia. If we could only simply be authentic to who we are, become self-aware about the pressure to conform, and be courageous enough to follow the "beat of the drum" we hear that is true to ourselves. Straight guys conform every day, and because of their need to 'fit in', they sacrifice their talents and often their selves. Gay men often do that same stupid thing for the same reasons...to "fit in". Bisexual men have their own baggage for they most often are not accepted by straight or gay men!

We all seek acceptance and sometimes go overboard in seeking validation and acceptance. Validation can only come from within, but affirmation is our need to

be accepted and actually loved for who we are. Such a struggle it can be when we are told over and over again what the standards are for such acceptance.

Anyway, I won't belabor this. It's an ever present issue.

on being--a person

by Michael (not verified) on November 16th, 2009 at 11:05pm.

I don't think of myself as a male or a female though I look, dress and act in many ways like a man, I do what I want, I generally conform to male dress but see no justification to be concerned with which way my shirts button or if they fit well and are in some cases intended for women so what. I have small breasts and wish they were a B size--why?? if piercing and tats are ok, why not tits? They are another source of sexual stimulation as many gals and guys know, I feel I'm 'accessorized'

I can cook, clean my home and even sew a curtain if necessary AND I build and race vintage roadracers along with other specifically male activities!

So what's the specific thing that would define me as male-- a penis? yes I have a nice one thank you but so do lots of what seem to be women. Let's get over the labels and become who we are.

Insightful post

by [Joan Price](#) ^[10] (not verified) on November 26th, 2009 at 11:49am.

Wonderful post, incisive, beautifully written. I'm 66, was in my thirties during the big rise of feminism. I agree with you that this is a revolution for all of us. If women want to break through gender biases and boundaries, then we absolutely must support the men who are doing the same.

Joan Price

Author of *Better Than I Ever Expected: Straight Talk about Sex After Sixty*

Join us -- we're talking about ageless sexuality at <http://www.betterthanieverexpected.blogspot.com> ^[11]

I love that you're writing

by LC (not verified) on December 9th, 2009 at 1:58pm.

I love that you're writing this, Sinclair, but I keep coming up against the same thing. Nothing you (or anyone else here) has presented as examples of "good masculinity" seem in anyway divorced from what I would expect in "good person". There are none there I wouldn't expect from a "good femininity" as well.

It's a dilemma to me, because it makes the whole notion of "masculinity" and "femininity"

somewhat vaporous in my eyes. it seems there should be something there, but every time I try to pin it down, it slips away. You talked in the first article of "swagger". Why should swagger be masculine?

Please do keep writing, I am finding this exploration fascinating.

[radical masculinity](#) ^[12] · [feminism](#) ^[13] · [gender](#) ^[14] · [gender roles](#) ^[15] · [masculinity](#) ^[16] · [education](#) ^[17] · [sex and gender](#) ^[18] ·



[radical masculinity](#) · [feminism](#) · [gender](#) · [gender roles](#) · [masculinity](#) · [education](#) · [sex and gender](#) ·

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