



An Introduction to Men's Liberation

Men's Mistreatment - An Unrecognized Problem

Groups of people are systematically mistreated in our societies, but the full extent of this is as yet largely unrecognized. The systematic mistreatment of groups has gotten attention, groups such as the blue-collar working-class, women, people of colour and children. These groups, groups that suffer discrimination by other more powerful and more privileged groups in the culture are usually granted the public label of being oppressed. However the systematic social mistreatment of men, has largely gone unrecognized.

A Fresh Look

To achieve our liberation, men need to be recognized as an oppressed group using a particular definition of oppression, one different from that described above. The definition I use is that a group is oppressed if that group is systematically mistreated by the society as a whole. This definition was developed in **Re-evaluation Counselling** and has led to successful counselling theory and practice for a wide range of groups around the world that would not otherwise have been accorded recognition and concern. To be oppressed it is not necessary to have a well-identified oppressor group doing it to you from a place of greater social power. The group that oppresses can be the whole of society with the great social institutions acting as agents of the oppression. The experience of being a child in most cultures installs a great deal of distress. Once they become adults these former children tend to act out all the ways they were mistreated as children at the many groups in our societies. Being socially "powerful or privileged" is not enough to stop your life from being crippled by mistreatment or oppressed by institutions.

Men are Oppressed By The Whole Of Society

Men as a group are not oppressed by women or children. We are oppressed as men by the whole of society. Distress patterns are systematically installed on males throughout our lives. Men are primarily hurt by several institutions, including the armed services, the courts, police and prisons, the drug and alcohol industries, the sports industry, and the work place. Men are falsely portrayed in the media. They are treated stereotypically and as less than human, throughout society and in all their interactions.

The extent to which we as men accept mistreatment and less-than-fully-human relationships is the extent that we not only accept our own oppression but also contribute to that oppression and pass the received oppression to other groups. The internalization of our own group's oppression is all that has been needed to maintain the oppressions of all other groups. When anyone gets tense and behaves in a less-than-fully-human way this behaviour reinforces the stereotypes for all the people involved.

Effects On All Men

The oppression of men affects all men. We have all been trained not to notice how men are, but just to notice what men do. During more than 20 years of organizing men into groups to talk about their lives (and make a start on working through the effects of oppression on themselves) I have been looking

for any individual man who does not show the signs of having been oppressed as a man. I have found none!

It's Not Power And Privilege

Men do get privilege from the way society sets up everyone with the roles they are in. The privileges are real and material. It needs to be faced as men. However the very best of being human is not material or material privilege it is our human qualities to be close, to care for others, build many relationships of all kinds. In these areas our lives as men are certainly not privileged and mostly not yet powerful.

It is not the giving of "power and privilege" to men that constitutes the socialization process in men. To those who have not been allowed their own sense of power, men can certainly "appear" to have lives of easy privilege, waited on by women, able to do as they wish. Society "prunes and molds" males to play a particular role as a male, traditionally appearing to be "in control", "strong", "decisive", "able to think in a jam", "powerful." That is how we are supposed to be to "make it" as a man. When men first begin to talk about themselves men usually pretend that life is easy and that they are in charge.

A Closer Look Is Needed

A closer look at a male's life shows a completely different process at work - an oppressive process that the population has been trained to not notice. We are supposed to just behave in a particular way "at" men. It's not questioned much (as yet). Men have been trained not to think or talk about their real lives.

Men Are OK

Men are OK really. It's what happens to males-the mistreatment that boys and men are abandoned to-that is not OK. Please remember that this is not really who men are in anyway. Some of the more central things that can happen to men (but certainly not the full list follows):

Men Have Lost Any Expectation of Being Cared About

Men have been systematically trained to give up our beginning inherent, easy expectation of having relaxed attention from another when we are tense. Big boys don't cry begins very early in a boys life unless his parents have made the effort that is needed to allow his emotional release process to be left intact. In men's groups men initially don't have any idea what to do with another's attention.

Boys Get Beat Or Be Beaten

Often from the first contact with peers, males are trained to fend for themselves in a "beat or be beaten" culture, from play group onwards. The alternative is social isolation. Having no friends is the worst thing that can happen to a young person.

Survival In Appearing Better

At the same time you are made to prove that it's "better to be male than female". This is the central lie in gender. It is learned at this age as a self defense mechanism because if you can pretend that you are better you get

"beaten on less". It starts with "girls germs" in kindergarten and develops into complete separation between boys and girls if adult attention is not given to help the little ones stay close and figure out male-female relationships. When men get to realize what real closeness and connection is with males there is a great urge to also get this "human" connection with women.

Separated By Gender

Males get separated from each other and from females over tension about sex. Any open closeness is easily confused with a prelude to sex. The culture confuses closeness between males with homosexuality. During a boy's early teens, there is peer group pressure to "prove your manhood" by attaining sexual experience with a female that is unmotivated by affection or closeness. In our present culture, tension about sex between males and females will tend to prevent real closeness. Even in good close sexual relationships between adults the pervasive conditioning about sex makes real intimacy a challenge. This distancing by sexual conditioning sits on top of and is defended by the already-mentioned isolation of boys from each other, from girls and any boys not seen to be living up to the traditional role of a male.

Trained To Hide Hurts And Pretend Ease

Having experienced the above social conditioning, males are then criticized, punished, rejected or harmed throughout childhood for the effects of the social conditioning that has been put upon them. This mistreatment forces males to hide or defend their distresses, which makes the process of recovering one's inherent masculinity much more challenging.

Men "Are" Their Work

The relationships we men grow into once our own emotions are suppressed and our relations with others have been distanced by sexual tensions, are based on seeing ourselves, not as "what we are" but as "what we do." By adulthood, men identify with their work; it is "who we are." Who we are personally is not really seen as important to anyone, including ourselves.

Over-responsible

We have grown up in a hard culture where things have to be done a particular way or we get criticized. As males, we are supposed to be OK alone out in the world. We internalize the endless criticism that drenches society; we feel like all that is wrong is our personal responsibility. Men are supposed to be responsible for everything! Except for child birth, everything heavy, dangerous or very stressful is a "man's" job.

A History Of War

Historically social structures have developed in the context of conflict and warfare. Men have been trained from an early age to accept their place in a kill-or-be-killed world. At the center of a man's identity is a frozen decision about what he would do if his willingness to sacrifice himself for his country was ever called into question. This is held up as the ultimate test for men's masculinity. The military structures in every country require that men accept the traditional commitment to kill or be killed with out objection or question.

Kill Or Be Killed

In basic training for the military, in "boot camp", the last of a man's sense of self-worth is undermined by systematic abuse. He is conditioned to be able to follow anonymous orders to kill or be killed. One's worth becomes equated with the ability to follow such orders.

Division From Each Other

Any differences between men are cause for fear and set men on guard against each other. Groups of men become deeply divided from each other. Our culture is full of divisions. Every stereotype that exists is used to divide people. Men's conditioning plays an important part in establishing and defending the divisions. Welcoming diversity reverses this conditioning and challenges men to be more united. Welcoming diversity is an important step for men.

The Lowest Priority Is Health And Well-being

Society prioritizes men's health and well-being, particularly that of working-class men, to be the last item on a man's agenda. Health and well-being get thought about only when the bills are paid, when everyone else is happy and when he has had a rare bit of time to think about how his life is going-maybe at the end of one of those five day public holidays.

Men Can Interrupt Mistreatment

We can actively and systematically reclaim our inherent natures from the distress patterns which have come to dominate them. As we do this we greatly enhance our ability to handle current mistreatment. We become able to stay aware and "present" with a person who is lost in a pattern of wanting to mistreat us. We remember that our nearest ally is the person caught up in that very behaviour. As we re-learn how to respond based on our inherent nature, our ability to reach that nature in others increases.

Make Allies By Being Allies

Tyranny exists only to the extent that we allow it to exist. Looking back at earlier societies, we see that previous forms of tyranny have eventually been overcome! People accept oppression only for so long; then they rise up and put a stop to it. Challenging all oppression including men's oppression is what men's liberation is about. The liberation of women and children is part of the work of men's liberation. As we achieve our liberation as men, we easily become effective allies to other oppressed groups, and they can become allies to us.

All Other Groups are Oppressed

Distress patterns with their resulting distressed behaviours have been installed on all groups in society. Distressed behaviour deprives people of fully human loving cooperative relationships. These distress patterns poison our workplaces, streets, homes, institutions and cultures. Such distress patterns have been taken as "unchallenged fact" in our cultures and have been incorporated into the society's institutions as stereotypes. These stereotypes predispose further mistreatment of those groups. The ways that people react to the stereotypes are then used to justify the stereotyped institutional practices. This brings another round of oppression, which imposes additional

distresses that reinforce the stereotypes.

Personal Responsibility For Removal Of Social Hazards

Young people are presented with the stereotypes as if they constitute "real information" about groups of people. The culture has raised everyone to treat men as though we are less than human. Until others know us well, we can expect to be treated as a stereotypical man! Anything bad that people have experienced from men or "heard" that men do, they will tend to suspect any man of being guilty of unless this stereotype is exposed and understood as a stereotype. No one is personally to blame for these stereotypes or their effects, but each of us is responsible for undoing the damage they have caused. Men's liberation is about removing the hazards to men (and to others), hazards left over from our societies formation by warfare.

Removing What Has Been Internalised

Men need to use counselling to challenge and discharge all that has them identifying with a distorted version of masculinity, a version that does not allow us our full humanity. This "internalised oppression" this distorted view of ourselves as men is what has had us wasting our lives, overworking, neglecting our health and well-being, accepting a limit to what we can do or be as a man, letting others abuse us, fighting others and getting lost in isolation. We can develop a men's liberation program that each man can identify with and by means of which he can work through the distresses that have been imposed on him. We need a program that enables a man to throw off all the ways he has been made to act less than his true self. This liberation process will make it possible for men to lead much larger lives.

Making Friends

At its most basic level, liberation means making friends. Making friends is key to our liberation from social mistreatment and oppression and to moving others along with us. This is because liberation happens in relationships. Our liberation depends on the careful building and maintenance of networks of relationships that allow us to become our real selves. We can work through our past tensions only when we have many good close relationships. And not before!

Taking Turns

Our first task in organizing men's liberation is reclaiming the relationship with ourselves that allows us to discharge and release our distresses. This needs care and time and the building of relationships solely devoted to that process. In doing this we will be developing close safe relationships with others. Co-Counselling is centrally useful to liberation for and by men. We have in men's culture a deep sense of fair play. Men simply need to establish safety with and get close to other men and persist in taking turns listening to each other, to be able to use the built-in healing process that all humans are born with.

Respect For All

Men have, in common with all other humans, a need to respect all other humans. Our liberation as men will progress only to the extent that we show respect to members of all of the groups we encounter.

Choice

We are completely free to choose which attitude we will take to our own and everyone else's distresses, tensions and behaviours. We can decide to see to it that the interactions that we have, brings us and others towards our underlying nature of humans, which is to care deeply for each other.

Safety For Men

As men the current society expects us to operate and maintain the general society. Most of the harm on average that men endure is outside the home, on the streets, at work, in the institutions. For this reason seeking change in the institutions that are the source of men's oppression is central for men. It is essential for us as men to build general safety in the culture at large. Change in institutions occurs by the one by one winning of allies. We need to change the institutions policy from valuing men for our ability to work (the default oppressive attitude) to valuing the overall health and well-being of men.

To start, we need safety in groups where we have very high levels of trust and safety. Our enemies are competition, violence, hatred, isolation, and mistreatment-mistreatment of everyone, but especially of men. Then, inviting others as they become ready into those safe relationships and groups. Eventually changing the tone and policies of institutions to one of safety for men (and women). Men who have grown up surrounded by the conditioning of today's cultures tend to devote themselves much more easily to the liberation of others whom they care about than they do to the liberation of themselves.

Making Safe Relationships

Until it is made "safe enough" men won't feel enough safety to work through any tensions anywhere in their lives, in any relationship! It may require some time and support from others to enable the relationship at home (with a dearest, for example) to be safe enough that a man can be openly emotional, openly able to "discharge" emotion. Neediness or dependence on a man by friends and family often function to exclude men from the safety needed to discharge their tensions. Helping others emerge from dependency and neediness and leading them to recognize their own power, tends to give us freedom to grow ourselves as men. In this way men's liberation can grow, assist, and be assisted by women's liberation.

A Draft Policy for Men's Liberation

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