

Men and Emotions

Alfred C.W. Davis
MBA, MDIV.

Dr. Ron Levant, a professor at Harvard University, coined the term "normative male alexithymia". He teaches that most North American males suffer to some degree from the conditioning of our culture, which causes men to be underdeveloped emotionally. His research shows that men have developed two primary responses to emotional issues. For vulnerable feelings including fear, hurt and shame, he sees men using anger as the "manly" response. For nurturing feelings, including caring, warmth, connectedness and intimacy, he sees men channeling these feelings through sex. It is called normative because his research shows that this limited dual response of anger or sex is the norm for men.

It is a male condition because he has found that women have a much wider range of emotional responses. He has found that women function through "emotional empathy"; whereas, men function through "action empathy". Emotional empathy is other oriented and exhibits the capacity for understanding interpersonal perspectives and emotions. Action empathy is self-serving and presents itself as the ability to enter into another person's point of view from the perspective of knowing what the other person is likely to "do". That is why men want to fix. Fixing is a "doing" activity. Alexithymia is the condition where "doing" replaces the cognitive step in the emotional experience. We can see this in the way that the four steps of the emotional process function:

- 1) emotions originate in the limbic system in the brain;
- 2) then, they move to the autonomic and endocrine systems;
- 3) next, they move to the muscles and skeletal systems which engage the flight or fight activities (doing); and
- 4) lastly, the cognitive awareness of the emotion is experienced.

Dr. Ron Levant believes that many men stop the emotional process at the third step and, therefore, cut off the cognitive awareness of the emotional experience, i.e. control their emotions. The result of stopping the emotional process at step three is that emotions become somatized in the body, resulting in physical symptoms such as: constrictions to the chest, throat or face, shortness of breath, upset stomachs, headaches, backaches, tension in the shoulders, insomnia, high blood pressure and heart disease.

How do men learn to handle emotions in this way? In the North American culture, there has been a persistent theme that one can call the "traditional male stereotype". From the Marlboro Man to Clint Eastwood and from football heroes to the father and grand-father who went before them, men have learned to do the following:

- control your emotions - "Don't cry, be tough!"
- be self-reliant - "Stand on your own feet and solve your own problems."
- perform - "Work hard, achieve high performance."
- compete - "A winner never quits and a quitter never wins."



- avoid being feminine - "Don't be a wuss! Be a man."
- disconnect sex and intimacy - "Be a great lover."

The Male Dilemma - If you conform to the male stereotype, you pay the price physically because suppressing emotions is unhealthy. Emotions do not just go away. They need to be dealt with and if they are not processed cognitively, they will be absorbed into the body and produce physical dis-ease. On the other hand, if you deviate from the male stereotype, you pay the price socially through teasing, judgment, isolation and loneliness. Men are taught to be competitive and superior.

Proof of North American Socialization: while feminism is teaching women to be more assertive, 143 studies over the last twenty years in North America still show that boys in this culture are more aggressive than girls. However, outside of North America, in 31 cross cultural studies, boys were more aggressive in only 6 countries, girls more aggressive in 5 countries and in the remaining 20 countries, males and females were equal. Also, Haviland and Malatest in 1981 did 12 studies of children up to age six months that showed boys to be, "substantially more emotionally reactive and expressive than girls" and "male infants startle, cry, become more excited and change emotions more rapidly than female infants."

If these studies are true, males are not born emotionally inferior to females in function and capability. Rather, they learn to behave this way in our culture. Dr. Levant believes that consistently stopping the emotional process at step three, before the cognitive stage, has left many men with an inability to function emotionally because they do not have the cognitive portion of the emotional experience to draw upon. In fact, in some men, the experience is so limited that they do not even have the vocabulary to talk about the different emotions. What is the result of this condition? The North American male tends to interpret the challenge of validation as a threat. The male learns to deal with this threat by being angry, aggressive and even violent. The opportunity for men is to realize that this limited range of emotions is something that can be changed. Men can develop emotional intelligence and at the same time be fully a man in the process because they possess just as much potential for relating emotionally as women. In fact, in our world today, the role of men is changing. They are expected to work in teams, commit to relationships, communicate intimate feelings, nurture children and integrate sexuality with love. Skills such as the ability to listen and the ability to relate emotionally are needed to succeed in the 21st century. Some of the traditional traits of malehood are worth preserving such as:

- willingness to work hard and sacrifice for the family
- the ability to withstand hardship and pain to protect others
- showing affection through action
- integrity and loyalty
- persistence in solving problems
- ability to stay calm in danger.

However, there are some other male traits that are worth addressing:

- overcoming emotional numbness which exhibits itself as a difficulty in feeling, and identifying and expressing one's own emotions,

- inability to feel and respond to the emotions of others,
- reliance on the emotional responses of anger, aggressive behaviour and violence,
- distancing from one's partner,
- exaggerated investment in work,
- substituting unconnected lust for sexual intimacy.

Christian counselling offers an alternative for the traditional male stereotype. For example, forgiveness brings healing that is not possible with the traditional male message of "Never say you are sorry". Christian principles can significantly help men reach their emotional potential. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus describes himself when he says, "for I am gentle and humble". When men imitate Jesus' humble ability to listen and his gentle caring approach to relationships, they can break out of the strong silent type and develop a full range of emotional capabilities that will not only help their marriages and relationships, but provide greater physical health as well. If you are numb to feelings and lack emotional empathy, Christian counselling can help you build your emotional language and connect with your feelings. You will be healthier physically, emotionally and spiritually. So let's go men, don't let anything hold you back from the freedom God intended for you.