



Empowering Men's Health & Well-being:
Knowledge & Skills for a Better Future Life
(Men@Health)



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Overcoming Harmful Masculinity Stereotypes

Interactive readings “Men’s health situation: addressing
men’s lack of understanding of their health problems”

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➤ Explanation of Topic

Many boys and men grow up hearing messages like “real men don't cry”, “men must always be strong”, or “men should earn more than their partners”. These are masculinity stereotypes: ideas about how men “should” behave, think and feel.

Stereotypes can become harmful when they are too rigid. They can make men feel that they must always be tough, never show emotion, never ask for help and never say “I am struggling”. This constant pressure can cause long-term stress and fear of not being “man enough”.

Research in Europe shows that strict masculinity norms are linked to risky behaviours and worse health for men. Men are more likely than women to smoke, drink heavily and delay going to the doctor, which increases their chances of serious illness and early death. For example, in the EU, 13% of men drink alcohol daily compared to 4% of women, and 22% of men smoke versus 15% of women.

Harmful masculinity stereotypes also affect mental health. Men and boys are often discouraged from talking about sadness, stress or loneliness. In many European countries, men are more likely to die by suicide even though women report more depression and anxiety.

Challenging masculinity stereotypes does not mean that being masculine is bad. It means allowing more than one way of being a man: men can be strong and sensitive, independent and able to ask for help, ambitious and caring.

Men can start overcoming harmful stereotypes by: talking honestly with friends and family about how they feel; going to a doctor or counsellor when something is wrong; sharing care work at home; and questioning jokes or comments that shame men for being “too soft” or taking care of their health. When men are free from rigid gender rules, they can make healthier choices and build more equal, respectful relationships.

➤ How can One Overcome Masculinity Stereotypes?

These may be challenged through a variety of modalities, especially: psychotherapy, workshops, and more (Andoh, 2025).

➤ Key Facts and Statistics affecting men

- In 2019, 13% of men drank alcohol daily, more than triple the rate for women (4%). Men also smoke more often: 22% vs. 15%, highlighting the health costs of masculine norms (EIGE, 2025).
- Traditional stereotypes of masculinities are related to worse health outcomes in men. This is evident from the gender gap in numbers of deaths which persists across all life-stages until age 69 when, largely as a result of premature male mortality, women form the majority of the population in Europe (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018).

➤ Masculinity Stereotypes and Men's Mental Health

One of the most documented consequences of harmful masculinity norms is men's reluctance to seek professional psychological help. A 2025 systematic review of 47 studies identified the most prominent barrier as the fear of being perceived as "less masculine" by seeking support. Men who did not seek professional help were significantly more likely to turn to binge drinking and substance use to manage anxiety, depression, and stress, creating a cycle that further deteriorated their mental and physical health (Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025).

Western societies expect men to embody ambition, self-reliance, stoicism, and emotional control consistently and persistently. When men fall short of these ideals, the likely responses are workaholicism, suppression, avoidance, or chronic stress. The World Health Organization has formally identified harmful masculinity as a serious public health concern, noting that it discourages help-seeking and contributes to higher rates of violence, gender inequality, and mental health struggles. A 2023 scoping review confirmed that tailored interventions, including online programmes and peer support groups that explicitly acknowledge masculine norms, show the greatest promise in encouraging men to seek care (Kim & Yu, 2023).

➤ Masculinity Norms and Gender-Based Violence

When men are socialised to associate dominance and aggression with masculine identity, the risk of interpersonal violence increases significantly. UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) recognises gender-based violence as a human rights violation rooted in structural discrimination, requiring the active engagement of men and boys to be effectively addressed (UNFPA, 2024). Research shows that men who adhere to the most rigid masculine norms can be three to six times more likely to report perpetrating sexual harassment than their peers (UNESCO, 2025).

A 2024 study found that men who experience violence as victims face a double burden: they suffer harm and also endure social stigma, since victimhood contradicts traditional masculine ideals of strength and control (O'Donnell et al., 2024). The Council of Europe (2023) underlined the importance of engaging men as active prevention partners. Research published in *Frontiers in Sociology* demonstrated that men who embrace "caring masculinities" are significantly less violent and more gender-equitable in their relationships (Moura, 2024).

➤ Education, Socialization, and Early Intervention

Masculinity norms are learned, not innate. Gender socialisation begins in early childhood, with parents transmitting expectations through behaviour modelling, implicit cues, and explicit messages such as "boys don't cry". Fathers are more likely to discourage emotional displays in sons, patterns that predict children's emotional expression and mental health outcomes in adulthood (DeGue et al., 2023).

Early adolescence (ages 10–14) is a critical window for intervention: puberty intensifies gender expectations, and boys not yet fully internalised in rigid norms remain more open to alternative frameworks of masculinity (UNFPA, 2024). School-based programmes using small-group critical reflection show the greatest promise — out of 12 evaluations measuring gender attitudes in such programmes, 11 found significant improvements (Dworkin et al., 2013). An example is Australia's "Silence is Deadly" programme, which provides psychoeducation to secondary school boys on men's mental health and help-seeking, explicitly addressing how traditional

masculine norms shape negative attitudes toward professional support (Calear et al., 2021, cited in Ingram et al., 2022).

➤ Digital Media and the Manosphere

Online platforms have enabled a loosely connected network of communities, the "manosphere", to reach millions of young men with messages promoting male dominance, emotional stoicism, and hostility toward gender equality. A 2025 survey by the Movember Institute found that young men aged 16–25 who regularly consumed this content reported higher rates of worthlessness (27% vs. 23%), nervousness (26% vs. 19%), and sadness (26% vs. 19%) than peers who did not engage with it (Andoh, 2025). Research by Stanaland (2024) also found that boys going through puberty often respond with aggression when told they do not fit traditional male stereotypes, suggesting this stage may be critical for developing "fragile masculinities".

➤ Caring Masculinities and Pathways to Change

The concept of "caring masculinities" (presenting care, empathy, and nurture as fundamentally compatible with manhood) represents one of the most promising frameworks for sustainable change. The State of the World's Fathers 2023 report by Equimundo found that men and women worldwide are calling for care to be placed at the centre of social life, requiring an overhaul of power structures and policies around both paid and unpaid care work (Equimundo, 2023). Boys who grow up with actively involved fathers are more likely to hold gender-equitable attitudes as adults, participate in caregiving, and avoid violence against partners (Moura, 2024).

At the therapeutic level, researchers distinguish between reconstructive approaches, reframing traditional norms such as self-reliance into adaptive behaviours, and deconstructive approaches, which aim to eliminate rigid gender expectations. Both show positive outcomes depending on context and individual readiness (Hoffmann & Addis, 2024). Community programmes such as Equimundo's Manhood 2.0 and the Taking Boys Seriously initiative in Northern Ireland demonstrate that systemic change is achievable when education, therapy, and community engagement work together (Harland, 2024). Paid paternity leave, flexible working policies, and investment in male-focused mental health services are indispensable structural complements to these efforts

Questions

Question 1: Harmful masculinity stereotypes can lead some men to:

- a) Take more health risks and avoid seeking help when they feel unwell.
- b) Visit the doctor more often than women and avoid all risky behaviours.
- c) Have no impact on their health or behaviour.

Correct answer: a)

Explanation: Rigid messages like “real men don’t show weakness” are linked to higher levels of smoking, heavy drinking and delaying visits to health services among men in Europe.

Question 2: Which of the following is an example of challenging harmful masculinity stereotypes?

- a) Telling a male friend to “man up” when he is crying.
- b) Encouraging a male friend to see a doctor or counsellor when he is struggling.
- c) Saying that men should never talk about their emotions.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Challenging harmful stereotypes means supporting men to express emotions, seek help and look after their health without shame. Encouraging a friend to get support respects his wellbeing instead of reinforcing the idea that he must always be tough and silent.

Question 3: According to research, why are men in many European countries more likely to die by suicide than women, even though women report more depression and anxiety?

- a) Men have biologically higher rates of mental illness that go undetected.

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b) Men are more often discouraged from talking about sadness, stress or loneliness, which prevents them from seeking help.

c) Women have access to better healthcare systems than men.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Harmful masculinity stereotypes discourage men and boys from expressing emotional distress. This silence makes it harder for men to seek professional support, contributing to higher suicide rates even when women report more symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Question 4: What is the main barrier that prevents men from seeking professional psychological help, according to a 2025 systematic review of 47 studies?

a) The high cost of therapy and lack of mental health services.

b) The fear of being perceived as less masculine by seeking support.

c) A general lack of interest in personal wellbeing.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: The review found that men frequently worry that admitting psychological distress or seeing a therapist contradicts social expectations of strength and self-reliance. This fear of being judged as "less of a man" is the most documented barrier to men seeking mental health care.

Question 5: When men do not seek professional help for mental health problems, what do research studies show they are more likely to do instead?

a) Resolve their difficulties independently through exercise and healthy habits.

b) Turn to binge drinking and substance use to manage anxiety, depression, and stress.

c) Talk openly with friends and family about how they feel.

Correct answer: b)

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Commented [3]: This could work for Topic3 or Topic2 (risk seeking behaviours)?

Explanation: Studies show that men who avoid professional support often rely on risky coping behaviours such as heavy drinking or substance use to manage emotional pain. This creates a damaging cycle in which mental and physical health deteriorates further over time.

Question 6: According to the text, what is the connection between rigid masculinity norms and gender-based violence?

- a) There is no proven link between masculinity norms and violence.
- b) Men who adhere to the most rigid masculine norms can be three to six times more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment than their peers.
- c) Gender-based violence is caused exclusively by economic factors, not gender norms.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Research shows that when men are socialised to associate dominance and aggression with masculine identity, the risk of interpersonal violence increases significantly. UNESCO data indicate that the most rigid adherence to masculine norms is strongly associated with a higher likelihood of perpetrating harassment.

Question 7: At what age is intervention to challenge harmful masculinity norms considered most effective, and why?

- a) In adulthood (30–40 years), when men are more emotionally mature and open to change.
- b) In early adolescence (10–14 years), when gender expectations intensify but rigid norms are not yet fully internalised.
- c) In early childhood (0–5 years), because gender norms are only formed before the age of six.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Research identifies early adolescence as a critical window: the onset of puberty intensifies social pressure around gender expectations, but boys who have not yet fully internalised rigid norms remain more open to alternative frameworks of masculinity. Programmes that reach boys at this stage have the greatest potential for lasting impact.

Question 8: What does the “manosphere” refer to, and what effect has it been shown to have on young men?

- a) A network of online communities promoting gender equality and emotional openness among men.
- b) A loosely connected network of online communities promoting male dominance and hostility toward gender equality, associated with higher emotional distress in young men who consume this content.
- c) A series of government-funded programmes designed to support men's mental health through social media.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: The "manosphere" is a network of online spaces that reinforce rigid views of manhood. A 2025 survey by the Movember Institute found that young men aged 16–25 who regularly consumed this content were more likely to report feelings of worthlessness, nervousness, and sadness compared to peers who did not engage with it.

Question 9: What does the concept of “caring masculinities” propose?

- a) That men should abandon all traditional masculine traits and adopt exclusively feminine behaviours.
- b) That care, empathy, and nurture are fundamentally compatible with manhood, and that men's involvement in caregiving promotes gender equality and reduces violence.

c) That caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility and men should focus on providing financially.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: "Caring masculinities" is a framework that challenges traditional gender roles by presenting care as an expression of strength, not a departure from it. Research shows that boys who grow up with actively involved fathers are more likely to hold gender-equitable attitudes as adults, participate in caregiving themselves, and be less likely to use violence against a partner.

Question 10: What is the difference between a "reconstructive" and a "deconstructive" approach to masculinity in therapy, as described in the text?

a) Reconstructive therapy focuses on medication, while deconstructive therapy focuses on talk therapy.

b) A reconstructive approach reframes traditional masculine norms into more adaptive behaviours, while a deconstructive approach aims to eliminate rigid gender expectations altogether.

c) There is no difference — both approaches are identical in practice.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Researchers Hoffmann and Addis (2024) distinguish between two therapeutic directions. Reconstructive approaches work within the framework of masculinity, redefining traits like self-reliance as positive and adaptive. Deconstructive approaches go further, encouraging men to detach their self-worth from the need to conform to masculine norms at all. Both have shown positive outcomes depending on the individual's readiness and cultural context.

Video

YouTube video : "'Toxic masculinity' isn't what you think it is."
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjwjhaUDBrA>

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Hoffmann, E., & Addis, M. E. (2024). To reconstruct or deconstruct? A fundamental question for the psychology of men and masculinities. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 25(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000440>

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