



KINDNESS AND MASCULINITY

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Kindness and Masculinity: How Are They Connected?

The ways that men and boys are often socialized in the U.S. limits their capacity to be vulnerable and to empathize with others. Some of the implicit social rules that boys are trained to follow, sometimes defined as “the Man Box,” include:

- ✿ do not cry openly or express emotion
- ✿ do not express weakness or fear
- ✿ demonstrate power, control, aggression, and dominance
- ✿ don't act “like a woman”
- ✿ don't act “like a gay man”
- ✿ be decisive
- ✿ don't need help

The ways that these social norms play out, even on subtle levels, make it difficult for a lot of young men to engage in the community around them in vulnerable, nurturing, or kind ways. Often times, when men do attempt to step outside of the “Man Box,” they are teased or ridiculed for violating these unspoken rules about how “real men” ought to behave. These norms for heavily gendered behavior, which result in peer (and adult) policing of gendered behavior, is what we at Emerge! understand to be at the core of “toxic masculinity.”

In order to be kind, male-identified folks have to be willing to step outside of the “Man Box.” The “Man Box” encourages men to disconnect from their own emotions and needs, and to discredit or ridicule the emotions and needs of others. Stepping outside of that box is a key component of learning to be kind to ourselves and to others. We need kindness to help create spaces where it's okay for other men to step outside of the box. Finally, it's important to acknowledge that when men are able to step outside of the “Man Box,” that creates safety for our entire community. When men feel safe to express their emotions and emotional needs, to ask for help, to respect the boundaries of others—without fearing how they will be treated or described—then we will live in a community in which kindness and masculinity can co-exist as the norm.

How Kindness Can Help Us Redefine Masculinity

Just as it takes courage and concern for the greater good to be kind, it takes those same qualities to step outside of gendered expectations that often trap male-identified people. When we think about the traditional expectations for masculinity, we know that nurturing is not included. Nurturing is typically associated with motherhood rather than fatherhood, and fatherhood is often associated with discipline. Creating a culture in which men are empowered to care for their home, for their children, and for their friends requires new ways of thinking about what it means to be masculine. Kindness helps create spaces for different forms of masculinity. Kindness helps us let go of traditional, limiting gendered expectations, and step outside of the “Man Box” so we can live full, healthy lives.



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Kindness and Masculinity Dilemmas

Jeremy notices that his friend Alex has seemed angry toward his friends and classmates lately. Jeremy knows that Alex must be going through something difficult because this is not normal behavior for Alex. Jeremy tries to ask Alex what is the matter, but Alex says, “Nothing.” Alex appears to be afraid to open up about how he is really feeling.

Jose hears his friend Sam speaking negatively about the girls in their class, and making unkind comments about their bodies. Jose wants to talk to Sam about his behavior, but he is afraid that he will be called out or ostracized for defending the girls.

Tim’s girlfriend Jenae tells him that she doesn’t want to be in a relationship with him anymore. Tim feels hurt, rejected, and embarrassed, and he’s afraid that others will see him as weak for being dumped. Tim feels the impulse to lie about Jenae, and to tell people hurtful things about her and their break-up so that he can save face.

Fred and Donte confront their good friend Carl about his controlling behavior with his girlfriend Stephanie. Carl feels defensive and embarrassed, and attempts to minimize, justify, and deny what his friends are telling him. Fred and Donte don’t want to lose their friendship with Carl, but they also don’t feel comfortable with his behavior and feel irresponsible ignoring it.

Mario feels hurt and unsafe by the way that his teammates use homophobic slurs in the locker room. He wants to address the behavior, but believes that doing so will simply make him a target for ridicule and alienation. He also believes that if he goes to his coach or another authority figure to address the problem, his teammates will feel betrayed and embarrassed.

Mark is really struggling in his relationship with his girlfriend, Alexis. He wants to see and talk to her more than they do. But Alexis says that she doesn’t have enough space to be by herself and also needs time to be alone with her own friends.

Want to Know More About Kindness and Masculinity?

Creating space for new and alternative expressions of masculinity takes work, but luckily there are pioneers who have already devoted themselves to creating that space. Resources include:

- ✿ The Emerge Center Against Domestic Abuse in Tucson facilitates a 26 week **Men’s Education Program (MEP)** which prepares men to take leadership on toxic / violent masculinity in their own community and improve their own relationships with women.
 - ✿ A great resource for men who want to take leadership roles with younger boys around issues of masculinity, the program is often utilized by teachers and community-based leaders who want to sharpen their own skills and knowledge.
 - ✿ Information meetings for the program are hosted on the 2nd Friday of each month. For more information folks should call 520-444-3078, or email mensinfo@emergecenter.org.
- ✿ **BruvLuv** is a Tucson collective of men who are devoted to challenging toxic masculinity in the community. They meet on the 4th Tuesday of each month from 6 to 8pm in the Southern Arizona Workspace. For more information, email: bruvluv520@gmail.com.

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Want to Know More About Kindness and Masculinity? *Continued*

- ✿ **A Call to Men** (www.acalltomen.org) is a nationally recognized organization that Emerge partners with in Tucson, and they do similar work of organizing men to end violence in a lot of communities.
 - ✿ Tony Porter's TED Talk (https://www.ted.com/talks/tony_porter_a_call_to_men/transcript?language=en) on the issue of organizing men to end violence against women remains a seminal moment in the movement for healthy masculinity.
- ✿ Everyday Feminism (www.everydayfeminism.com) is a website dedicated to intersectional feminism, and it has myriad practical resources and inspirational articles, particularly related to the topic of healthy / toxic masculinity.
- ✿ The Mask You Live In (<http://therepresentationproject.org/film/the-mask-you-live-in/>) is a great documentary about the ways we were raised as boys, and how we are raising our boys now. It's available to stream on Netflix!
- ✿ bell hooks' groundbreaking book on men's work, [The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love](#) (NY: Washington Square Press, 2004), is an incredible resource.
- ✿ Paul Kivel has also provided an important resource in [Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears our Lives Apart](#) (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 1998).