

GOOD MEN BEHAVING BADLY

Why do good men sometimes behave badly? What is it that might shape a man's thoughts and behaviours in those moments?

Well let's look at what culture and biology does in shaping a man's way of being and see if there might be some answers there.

Failure and it's sidekick, Shame

Men are told from the cradle that they must be a success and perform. In a sense, even evolution points them that way as the provider and protectors - the guy who is meant to go out there and get the goods. To make this happen it seems men come equipped with subtle differences in their chemical and biological make up.

Nature has gifted them with mostly bigger muscle mass and with more efficient blood flow to those muscles. Quicker reflexes and longer strides come into the mix, as does more electrical activity in their central nervous systems to drive all these important differences. They also have a part of the brain called the amygdala, that is involved in the defensive responses and which is much thicker than a woman's amygdala. Wonderful as these gifts are, they also seem to heighten a particular acutely physically felt sense of shame.

All this manifests itself in a trigger-happy sensitivity to feeling incompetent, not valuable, unloved, unneeded or unimportant.

What might this look like?

When a man looks into the mirrors around him

Well, it's as if a man experiences another's response to him as a mirror governing his sense of well-being, performance and personal value. And it seems that while both genders use this 'mirror' and can feel shame, these 'mirror' experiences particularly affect men...and there is none more potent a mirror than a partner!

Experiencing his partner as unhappy might well feel like, "If she's unhappy-then I've failed!" In fact, even 'everyday' criticism can feel like her yelling, "You've failed at making me happy!" It certainly might not be what she intended but given how a man is neurobiologically wired, this is often what actually lands in his world and experience.

The dreaded Therapy word!

So here a man is with relationship problems and the dreaded 'Therapy-word' is said.

"I think we need some help...lets go get some therapy/counselling and see if someone else can help us!" she says hopefully.

Now given that the words therapy/connection/attunement/validation/ are mystifying to a man - they really are not words in his language - chances are he's already looking in that mirror and thinking that his deficiencies are being pointed out to him!

Let's look a little deeper at what this invitation is asking of a man.

Firstly it's asking him to;

- Recognise something is wrong with him
- Admit he needs help
- Openly discuss/express emotions
- Show vulnerability
- Depend on someone else for guidance and support

Now this can be a challenge to a woman, but think for a moment about a man who after all is innately wired in ways that make it difficult for him to admit (given his sensitivity to shame) that there's something wrong-let alone identify what's wrong!

Not only that, but a trigger-happy acute sense of shame shouts scathing, internal condemnation of any feelings of need, dependence or incompetence loudly into his ear.

AND... let alone that trying to talk out loud about all this touchy-feely stuff freaks him out! Why?

Emotional talking in two different worlds

Emotional talk tends to produce higher physical stress in men, with increased Cortisol levels (the stress hormone) making them more tense, jumpy, irritable and distracted.

In women, talking releases a useful hormone called Oxytocin that serves to calm, reassure and create confidence. Turns out that the male testosterone reduces the effect somewhat of any oxytocin in the man. The outcome of a conversation about emotions between a man and a woman... well, she often feels better whilst he can feel stressed and twitchy!

And so we begin to get a glimpse of the extraordinary act of heroism it might take for a man to even think about going for help or doing some sort of workshop.

Do men feel emotional pain?

You bet!

It just looks different to the way a woman tends to show it. Women tend to be more straightforward in expressing their pain with tears or words. Men often get angry. As one author says, "Anger is a man's way of weeping". Other 'ways of weeping' for a man might look like drinking, withdrawing, being defensive, blaming, irritability, possessiveness, excessive work, ultra competitiveness, insomnia or philandering.

In these days of shifting relationship roles, men are thinking about how to relate with emotional intelligence-how to parent sensitively and how to manage emotions authentically. The question that stands in their way is,

"Can I do all this and still really feel like a man?"

So what are some of the answers to this intriguing dilemma? We know there are answers because men and women have been having deep conversations through the ages with remarkable success and regularity!

Given a man's neurobiological wiring towards being the protector and his different 'language', it can be helpful to provide a man with a very clear, concrete explanation or instruction about the what /when and how of a conversation about emotions. **Give a man a map** and he is empowered. This is why structured dialogues can be so helpful in clearly defining who does what and how and when.

Let's respect that a man about to courageously embark on a conversation about emotional issues needs a **slower 'warm-up'**. He needs time and space to take his own pace at identifying and expressing thoughts and emotions - he's not necessarily avoiding the issues!

Men want to protect and provide

And particularly when things have apparently gone wrong or mistakes have been made a partner can approach the whole subject with a new more empathic understanding. The understanding that his sensitivity to an acute sense of failure and shame needs to be born in mind.

Thinking or saying things like:

"It's hard to talk about feelings when, for your whole life, you might have kept them to yourself"

"You're a good man who made some mistakes.

"Your heart is in the right place but I imagine it's hard for you to show that"

Why else might these statements / attitudes be helpful in creating space for men to grow into their masculine independence, self-control and personal power?

There is an understanding of a man's innate desire to protect implied in them all.

And it turns out that this desire is the glue that keeps a man bonded to his partner, his children and others he cares about. If a man doesn't feel successful at protecting his loved ones he suffers a painful dip in self esteem no matter how successful he might be in other areas - so then he finds it difficult to fully love.

This explains why men under stress at work are likely to withdraw/isolate from their families to keep from feeling their own condemnation of their failure to protect their family. This is especially true as in our modern culture male protection comes largely defined in financial terms

And finally...men don't groom!

Consider the animal kingdom with me for a moment.

In females, all the grooming, licking and preening behaviours that they do in a group ensure the cohesiveness of the group. They linger round the outside keeping an eye out for danger or food. They are there to protect and provide. So it's interesting that the male animals stay bonded to family and other social groups by their physical proximity to their females.

This makes sense of the how men often can be on the computer/tv/playstation/workshop feeling entirely close to his wife even though she might be in a different room. He isn't ignoring her-it's that her presence nearby gives value and stability to his life and routines. She, on the other hand, might well be feeling lonely, frustrated and abandoned.

Thought of like this, a new space for understanding begins to open up.

So, I hope you have found some of these new understandings about the differences between men and women as intriguing as I do...viva la difference!