

Shame-O-Phobia- Why men fear therapy

by David Wexler

Several years ago, I was on a family trip, sitting on a bench with my wife in a plaza in Paris. Loaded down with shopping bags, she asked me to grab her purse and carry it over to a new spot across the plaza. That's all. Yet even though I knew I was being stupid, I couldn't do it. The 15 seconds being seen carrying a purse were beyond my capacities as a card-carrying male.

My wife looked at me like I was nuts and shook her head in disgust.

So what was my problem? All I could envision were people smirking as they saw me publicly toting that damn purse, all of my hard-earned Guy Points accumulated from my half-century of being male suddenly vanishing without a trace.

Shame may be the least understood dimension of men's inner experience—by both men themselves and the people who live with them. In *Affliction*, Russell Banks's classic novel about the tragedy of masculinity, a ne'er-do-well named Wade Whitehouse plans a special Halloween weekend with his 11-year-old daughter, Jill, who lives with her divorced mother, Lillian. Wade's clumsy efforts to make sure Jill has a good time succeed only in making her feel anxious and out of place, and she winds up pleading with him to take her home. But instead of her distress, what stands out for him is his sense of failure: he's shamed by the fact that she's unhappy.

Eventually, still searching for a way out of the pain, Wade gets into an ugly brawl with his ex-wife and her new husband, after Jill secretly calls them to pick her up. As irrationality, belligerence, and self-destructiveness take over, Wade becomes a good man behaving badly, blinded by the specter of his own shameful failure.

Men who've experienced toxic doses of shame early in life will do anything to avoid re-experiencing it as they grow older. It can originate from family experiences, from peer experiences, or just from the culture at large. A shamed boy becomes a hypersensitive man, his radar always finely tuned to the possibility of humiliation. His reaction to slights—perceived or real—and his ever-vigilant attempts to ward them off can become a kind of phobia. Tragically, the very men who are most desperate for affection and approval are the ones who usually can't ask for it: instead, they project blame and rejection and perceive the worst in others. Sometimes the smallest signs of withdrawal of affection will trigger old wounds, and they'll suddenly lash out at those they see as slighting them, even as they're unaware of the dark feelings stirring inside them. This is a state of mind that many of us in the field call shame-o-phobia, an endemic condition throughout Guy World.

With their profound fear of appearing weak or—god forbid!—feminine, most men will do whatever it takes to prove their manhood. In one recent study, men were assigned to three different groups and given the task of keeping their hand in painfully icy water for as long as they could. Those who were told that the ability to withstand the discomfort was a measure of male sex hormones and an index of physical fitness showed greater cardiovascular reactivity, reported feeling more performance expectations, and kept their hand in the water the longest. This was in contrast to the group who were told the test was a measure of high levels of female sex hormones and the ability to bond with children, and with the third group, who received no explanation at all.

What does this tell us? The length of time a guy will tough it out with his hand submerged in freezing water depends on whether he thinks his masculinity is in question. For some men, their hand could fall off before they'd risk the shame of not seeming "man enough" to take it.

Women feel shame, too, of course, and much of the emotional experiences for men and women are more similar than not. But there are still some fundamental differences in how men are both hardwired and acculturated that can't be ignored in the therapist's office. Even as infants, boys are more overstimulated by direct eye contact and show less ability to regulate arousal through intimate connection. These infant boys then grow up in a Guy World culture that emphasizes successful performance and de-emphasizes reliance on others as a way to self-realize. Furthermore, evolutionary psychology teaches us that men are wired for procuring and performing (while females are wired for tending and befriending)—a trait that may provide a biological backdrop to the modern male focus on success. Without that, he ain't much—or so he feels.

To ignore the powerful effect of shame-o-phobia is to risk not really "getting" men, even if you happen to be a man yourself. An otherwise benign or mildly embarrassing event—like carrying the purse across the plaza, or a daughter who isn't having a good time at a Halloween party—can over-activate a man's fear that he's failing at some central task of being a real man.

Broken Mirror

A metaphor from self-psychology, the broken mirror, is particularly helpful in understanding the dynamics of male shame. This sensitivity to shame—to feeling incompetent, not valuable, unloved, unneeded, unimportant—is often governed by the psychological relationships with mirroring-self objects in our lives. It works like this: the response from others serves as a mirror, reflecting an image that governs our sense of well-being. Sensitivity to mirroring-self objects and broken mirrors isn't gender-specific, but men are more vulnerable to experiencing these mirrors as referenda on their performance and personal value. When the mirror image is negative (or is perceived as negative), the reflection can reactivate a man's narcissistic injury and deliver a blow to his feeling of competence. There's no more potent a mirror for a man than the one reflected by his intimate partner. If she (or he, in a gay relationship) is unhappy, he's failed. If she offers even a normal, nonabusive criticism, it's as if she's yelling at him: "You've failed at making me happy." And the shame-o-phobic man, vulnerable to broken mirrors and narcissistic injuries, will hear that message whether it's unintended or not.

A few years ago, I was interviewed on a radio show about the psychological concept of the broken mirror. Afterward, the (male) interviewer said to me off-air: "Damn! Now I get what happened to me yesterday! I came out of the bathroom after shaving and I'd nicked myself a little on the cheek. My girlfriend looked up at me and said, "Oh, what happened to you? That's the second time you've done that this week?" And I just went off. I started yelling at her, and then I stormed off, and our plans for the day were ruined. And it was all because I had a manhood attack. I know she didn't mean anything like that, but that's what I heard. What the hell's wrong with me?"

This man experienced his girlfriend's comments as a stab at his masculinity. It was as if she'd said, "What kind of loser are you that you can't even shave properly? Any man should be able to pull that off!" To a guy whose self-esteem—particularly his masculine self-image—feels vulnerable (this includes most men), this simple interchange, silly as it sounds, can feel like an unbearable assault. My radio interviewer, as best as I could tell, didn't suffer from a narcissistic personality disorder, nor was he particularly outside the norm. He experienced the broken mirror and reacted in ways that are typical, in one form or another, for many of us men.

Men and Therapy

The field of counseling and psychotherapy hasn't done a particularly good job of creating a user-friendly environment for male clients. The problem begins with a lack of awareness about the profound impact of shame-o-phobia and the vulnerability to broken mirrors. Furthermore, there's a mismatch between

the relational style of many men and the touchy-feely atmosphere of most counseling and psychotherapy.

Think of what we typically ask a man to do in therapy settings: recognize that something is wrong with him, admit that he needs help, openly discuss and express his emotions, get vulnerable, and depend on someone else for guidance and support—all extremely challenging tasks in Guy World.

Too often therapists—both male and female—try to massage men into being more like women in the ways they express themselves and experience their emotions. So it isn't surprising that only one-third of psychotherapy clients are men. Either men have fewer psychological problems (not likely!), or else many are too turned off by the whole therapy enterprise to seek the help they need. In fact, men usually get therapy only because someone else has insisted on it. When I ask men in an initial therapy session, "What are you doing here?" the answer I hear is "My wife told me I needed to be here." Other times, it may be their boss or their grandmother or their doctor, or even a probation officer. They perceive the decision to use the therapeutic services and the process of using them to be not particularly helpful and not particularly masculine—often even downright threatening. It's our job, as counselors and therapists, to adapt our approach to these realities.

Part of what makes treating men challenging is that they generally don't signal their psychic pain as clearly and straightforwardly as women. In the post-feminist turmoil of shifting relationship dynamics, men have been struggling to find a way to relate intelligently, parent sensitively, and manage their emotional needs with more consciousness and depth. Many of us haven't figured out a way to do all these things and still really feel like men. Author William Pollack describes men's anger as their "way of weeping"—an expression of underlying pain that women would more likely display with tears or more direct expressions of sadness and loss. Men also "weep" by drinking, withdrawing, acting defensive, blaming others, getting irritable, being possessive, working excessively, becoming overly competitive, suffering somatic complaints and insomnia, and philandering.