

WHY MEN CAN'T / DON'T TALK!

Several years ago I was attending a Men's Conference in Austin, TX, with Marvin Allen as the keynote speaker. I was on active duty in the Air Force at the time and Chief of an outpatient mental health clinic. The Air Force sponsored my attendance, as I was doing a lot of work at the time with men in individual and group therapy sessions.

The evening prior to the start of the conference, I was in the hotel lounge and a man approached me...unaware that I was at the hotel to attend the Men's Conference. He had seen a poster board, welcoming the attendees. He commented to me about his "bad luck"...wishing that his reservation had been at a hotel sponsoring a Women's Conference! He asked me if I knew anything about what was going on and I said "yes".

I then proceeded to describe an admittedly gender stereotyped scenario:

Scenario:

- Children, one boy and one girl, both age 5 riding tricycles in a driveway.
- They both fall and have similarly bruised knees (and egos).
- They are likely to respond in similarly emotional ways (crying for help).

Response:

Especially, if Dad happens to be present but Mom may respond same way (especially with strong cultural influences)...

- The boy is criticized and told to stop crying, get back on the bike and "I never want to hear another sound out of you."
- The girl, on the other hand, is *much* more likely to receive supportive hug and words of consolation and encouragement.

Implication:

The boy, having been told in no uncertain terms to be tough and strong, becomes competitive, hard and unfeeling...left to solve problems on his own accord. He may envy how his "sister" is nurtured but becomes very reluctant to ask for "help" from anyone. For example, many men refuse to ask for directions when lost and will drive for hours in aimless and often fruitless attempt to find a destination.

Throughout my years of practice I have employed that scenario on numerous occasions...in individual, marital, group and classroom sessions. A very interesting development occurred with when I used this scenario in working with Firefighters. 18 or the 20 attendees in the class were male and seemed to universally concur with the

depiction of how their parents reacted to them as children. The two females were raised *similarly* to the male firefighters...contributing to them both having greater understanding of how they “happened” to enter a traditional male dominate line of work!

My thinking of communication difficulties is certainly not unique, as the psychology literature is filled with related texts, by writers of all backgrounds. Nevertheless, my comments might have some freshness and merit...at least to the point of eliciting further discussion. As I have thought about the childhood scenario over these past years, it came to my attention that there are many other influences that can reinforce the gender stereotype:

Examples:

- Living Room: Stop that! Your father is going to get you for this!
- Dinner Table: Son! Don't talk with your mouth full / eat!
- School Bus: Shut up! Don't disturb the driver!
- Library: Silence! People are trying to read!
- Church: Quiet! People are trying to pray!
- Classroom: Hush! We're trying to learn here!
- Ball Field: Listen to me! Here's how you will play!

Analysis:

Moms and Dads need to be aware of this phenomenon, acknowledge their own backgrounds and work together toward creating a communication atmosphere by which it is acceptable for *both* boys and girls to feel comfortable talking about feelings.

Author:

Harry P. Howitt, PhD
Chief, Community Behavioral Health Service
Brooke Army Medical Center
Fort Sam Houston, TX

For more information, or to contact Dr. Howitt, call

Men's Health Network
202-53-MHN-1 (6461) x 101
info@menshealthnetwork.org

(over)