

IN THE COMPANY OF OTHER MEN: The Importance Of Having And Maintaining Male Friendships

There are no two ways about it. We as men desperately need other men in our day-to-day emotional lives. All human beings, male and female, need friends and confidant(e)s. Research is becoming even clearer that having other people to talk with about our important life concerns is part of what keeps us healthy: we get sick less frequently and this actually helps us live longer. Girls and women, who often get very different and much more positive messages from the culture about the importance of emotional connection, have experienced the benefits of doing this for a long time. Take a look at which gender lives longer. This emotional connecting is not something that's necessarily innate for women, however. And we as men also can, and need to, learn how to do it. **Being emotionally connected to others is an important part of the "life management" related to handling your anger more effectively (this is true for women AND men).**

I didn't really have a clue about forming friendships with other males as I came into adolescence. As a youngster, I was the chubby kid who wore the infamous "Husky" jeans from the 1950's (this was a "brand" on the back of the pants that announced to one and all that you were "fat"). I was not very good at playing sports and I was generally one of the last ones picked for kickball, dodgeball, and other schoolyard activities. I was regularly bullied and ridiculed by other children. I guess I could say that I had a few friends in my childhood but these relationships mostly revolved around school activities.

Prior to high school, I spent a lot of time by myself engaged in solitary endeavors, playing with my toy soldiers, cutting out newspaper clippings about sports and political happenings, collecting coins and baseball cards, and spending time with our family dog, a black Labrador named Tarbrush, who was often my only confidant in my youth (my parents told me when I was an adult that I often sat with him at the edge of the woods on our lot and talked with him for extended periods of time during my childhood). I didn't really have any models for connecting within my family either. My father vacillated between being emotionally distant and neglectful or actively shaming and demeaning. Much of the time with my siblings involved bickering and bullying. My younger brother was often the target of my verbal and physical attacks. I didn't learn much about how to be close to other people, especially boys and men.

But, in this respect, I do not think that I am all that different from many men in this culture. Even when men do manage to connect with each other, it is often through playing or watching sports together, drinking and drug-taking, work connections, kids' activities, and talking about current events, sporting events, the money that we have, the "toys" we buy and own, and our financial investments. Many of us don't want to take the risk to tell another man what we really think and feel about something that is important to us in our day-to-day lives. It is as if we are "activity buddies," and, unfortunately, if the activity is no longer there, the reason for continuing the relationship disappears. Lacking any kind of emotional connection, no longer sharing mutual activities often means the end of the "friendship." I have worked with many male clients who have gone through intensely difficult and troubling times in their

lives and have never even thought about sharing their emotional pain with a male friend, even if they had one. Why is this so? Why are we as men so fearful about opening the door to other men?

In reality, there are some pretty good reasons. First of all, we often have a rigid belief in a very narrow definition of masculinity and don't have many, if any, good models of healthy male interaction. This is especially true if our fathers had little or no time, energy, or inclination to make a real emotional connection with us. The father-son relationship is a primary way that we learn to count on and trust other males. If that was not present in our lives in childhood, then we don't really have a road map that can show us how to form healthy relationships with other men.

In addition, our culture gives us powerful messages about what it is to be a "real man." We have all experienced these messages, coming at us from our families, the media, and societal institutions like the military. Real men need to be strong, self-sufficient, independent, successful, in charge and dominant, stoic, competitive, emotionally unexpressive, and, in essence, invulnerable. There is no time for emotions of any kind, except perhaps anger (and often that is punishing or disrespectful anger used to assert power and control over others). We are told that feelings just "get in the way" of being productive and accomplishing what we are supposed to do as men. We are also acutely aware that other men receive these same messages.

This means that other men cannot be trusted with our innermost thoughts and emotions. So when we even contemplate sharing how we really feel with another man, the societal taunts rattle around in our heads and hearts: *"Nobody else feels like that," "What's the matter with you?" "What a loser," and "You must be a real wimp."* The intense fear about this kind of shaming reaction stifles many men's desire to talk and truly connect with other men. And this fear often gets covered up by the macho attitude: *"What goes on with me is nobody else's business and I don't give a damn about what's happening with anyone else."*

These attitudes get reinforced even more by our over-dependence on our female partners. In high school and college, I generally focused on my girlfriends or even other friends who were females when I needed to talk about something important. The notion exists for many men that a major responsibility of our intimate partners is to take care of all our emotional needs. Society often teaches women this as well: they are supposed to be the emotional caretakers of their partners and their family. That generally means that she is expected to "read our minds," figure out or "just know" what is really going on with us, and then somehow "make it all better." This sounds a lot more like a mother than an adult partner (and even mothers cannot really pull this task off very effectively). This expectation is a prescription for disaster in a primary relationship. What if your partner is having a bad day herself and doesn't do the "job" she is supposed to do for you emotionally? This way of looking at partners is a "set-up" for hurt, disappointment, frustration, and resentment, which can then lead to hurtful or punishing expressions of anger with her for not living up to our unrealistic expectations.

Another major barrier for many men is an excessive devotion to their work and career. Working long hours to the detriment of our family and personal life is often considered a "badge of honor" for many men in this culture. Unfortunately, this ethic leaves little time or energy left to build and maintain friendships with anyone, sometimes even our life partners. The workplace today, especially corporate America, also teaches men to be "cautious" about whom they can trust. Men don't want to be taken

advantage of or have personal disclosures used against them, a “clear and present danger” with today’s mergers and layoffs and an often “cutthroat” corporate environment.

A final barrier that interferes with friendship for many men is an extreme reluctance to confront and address conflict effectively when problems do arise with others. Many men have an intense sensitivity to personal “slights,” both real and imagined, but also a “macho bravado” that gets in the way of admitting hurt, fear, sadness, disappointment, and other vulnerable emotional pain. To address an issue or conflict means that a man has to acknowledge something difficult and potentially painful, which is often viewed as being the same as “displaying weakness” and admitting that he cares enough about the relationship to be concerned about whatever the issue happens to be. It is generally easier for most men to simply “cut off” the relationship if it becomes too troublesome or problematic and then move on to another superficial connection with someone new (which is what men may do with their female partners as well).

The first step in beginning to connect more with the men is, simply stated, just to take the risk to try it. Often there are men around us, especially as we age, who are looking for this same connection, but many of us are hesitant and fearful about making the first move, figuring that no other men really have the same desire as we do to truly connect. Seek out opportunities to talk with other men about something other than who won the football game, what you have most recently purchased, or how your investments are doing in the stock market. Be aware of times when other men around you may be “opening the door” to try to connect emotionally with you by sharing something about their personal lives, past or present. Think about reaching out to men from earlier times in your life who used to be important to you in order to re-connect with them (the internet actually makes this a lot easier than it used to be). Or think about reaching out to men in your current life whom you might want to get to know better. And then do it. You can start small. But start somewhere!

Many men have told me that, when they did take this initial risk, the other man was not only open to it, but responded enthusiastically with his own feelings and experiences that were related to what had just been shared. There may indeed be men who respond poorly to your efforts to emotionally connect with them, but keep in mind that this kind of response is **THEIR** problem, not yours.

Another important part of connecting with men is to work at being a good friend yourself. This means asking questions about what is going on in other men’s lives rather than simply “getting up on the soapbox” and talking only about yourself. It also means really listening to what others tell you about what they think, feel, and want. Many of us as men struggle with the tendency to want to “fix” situations that others, male or female, start to share with us. This disturbing tendency often shuts down other people if our “solution” is not what they are really looking for when they began the conversation with us.

Truly listening means actively focusing on what others are saying and realizing that the issue is their struggle, not ours. Do not immediately jump in by offering solutions and trying to resolve the problem. Often we as men, similar to women, just want someone to listen to us and this kind of listening can be healing and therapeutic in and of itself. Part of this issue is also avoiding the tendency to make judgments about what is being said. Offering our ideas and perspective is an important part of being a friend but we first need to really attend to what the other person is trying to communicate to us and seek to understand it from their perspective.

A final part of forming and maintaining male friendships is to watch out for “all or nothing” thinking when it comes to these kinds of connections. When I finally did start connecting with men, I became resentful at times when other men were not the kind of friend to me that I thought they should be (and the kind of friend I believed I was to them). When this happened, I would cut them off and start a “feud” that could involve no contact at all for months. For me, this often occurred because there was someone or something in their lives that took them away from me, either in terms of time spent together or our emotional involvement. These included times when my friends started new relationships with women, moved away to go to school or take a new job, or began to have children. The bottom line is that I was hurt and jealous. But instead of talking about it these feelings and moving through them in a healthy way, I had a tendency to just pull back and “stonewall” as a way to hurt and punish them for disrupting our friendship and my life.

Be aware of unrealistic expectations with friends and a desire that you may have to determine how they should be and act in the friendship. Even very close friends have their own lives as well as their emotional connection with us. Work hard to accept and appreciate what other men are willing to offer and give to you. Talk about resentments in your friendship and let go of the idea that you can control who they are, what they think and feel, and how they act. Maintain the foundation of a friendship with good will so that, when there does turn out to be more time for additional connecting, both of you will actually feel like doing it.

Friendships with men are part of the “glue” that holds life together for us as male human beings. Take the time to form and maintain close relationships with a few men in your life. They can also be a significant part of learning to recognize and deal effectively with anger and our other emotions. I’m very fortunate today to have a number of close male friends with whom I can literally share anything that has affected me, does affect me, or will affect me in my life (that group of friends also includes that brother of mine whom I “picked on” so mercilessly as a child).

Take the risk and the time to share who you are with someone besides your partner. We have an enormous amount to offer and learn from each other as men. Open yourself to the many rewards that come along with doing this. It is well worth the effort!