

From Shame-Based Masculinity to Holistic Manhood

By [Dr. Michael Obsatz](#)

When I was a little boy, I was repeatedly shamed and bullied. I was hit and hurt, and told that I was not a “real,” guy. I was put down, ridiculed, made fun of.

Being shamed regularly was an attempt to control me, and make me feel bad about myself. The more worthless I felt, the more the bullies and shamers could feel happy that they accomplished their goal. It has taken years to overcome that early shaming and bullying. Emotions I felt went ranged from anger to fear to sadness.

Millions of boys are shamed into fitting into a model of masculinity. They are called sissies, wimps, wusses, momma’s boys, etc. if they don’t conform to a cultural norm. In the process of conforming, boys lose a part of themselves, and spend their lives grieving these losses. Rather than being allowed to authentically develop into their true selves, they are coerced into a narrow “blueprint” of masculinity. Herb Goldberg, in his book “The New Male,” written in 1979, says that “blueprint for masculinity is blueprint for self-destruction.” This shaming process means that boys experience loss if they do fit in, and if they don’t fit in. It is a no-win proposition. **There are at least twenty-five messages that boys are taught.** They include the following:

1. Maintain a strong image
2. Prove manhood by taking risks, even if foolish
3. Sexualize affection - all touch is sexual touch
4. Have many sexual conquests
5. Don’t be a virgin
6. Don’t be vulnerable
7. Don’t cry
8. Don’t express fear
9. Don’t ask for help, guidance or directions
10. Don’t trust anyone
11. Be disposable - be willing to die for your country
12. Pretend to know even when you don’t
13. Act tough
14. Be in control

15. Dominate others
16. Devalue what is “feminine” in yourself and others
17. Be emotionally detached
18. Tough it out
19. Don’t take care of your body
20. Win at all costs
21. Abuse your body
22. More is better - money, sex, food, alcohol
23. Objectify women
24. Prove manhood
25. You are what you achieve or accomplish

Boys who are close to their mothers are shamed. There is a fear that boys will turn into women if they are not tough enough. The losses that boys experience as a result of this process include:

1. Loss of intimate connection to mother and father
2. Loss of emotional outlets - crying, showing fear
3. Loss of trust in other males who betray, tease or shun them
4. Loss of the option to be gentle, nurturing, vulnerable
5. Loss of the freedom to make mistakes
6. Loss of internal awareness - emotional disconnection
7. Loss of learning opportunities - empathy, other “feminine traits”
8. Loss of power over one’s own destiny
9. Loss of support
10. Loss of freedom to give and receive non-sexual affection
11. Loss of ability to connect non-verbally

12. Loss of trusting one's own intuition

Two aspects of the grieving process are anger and depression. Many men respond to these losses by becoming hostile and angry. Other men become isolated, lonely and depressed. There are many costs of the boys and men, as well as the larger culture due to men grieving over these losses. A few of these include:

1. Violence against men, women and children
2. Deaths due to foolish risk-taking
3. Addictions to numb out pain
4. Depression, isolation and loneliness
5. Unnecessary wars
6. Injuries and deaths due to men's sports - racing, boxing, etc.
7. Father absence - over 36 million children live without biological fathers
8. Hierarchy, racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, etc.
9. Unhealthy families, and unhealthy male-male and male-female relationships
10. Child abuse and neglect
11. Sexual abuse against women
12. Shame-based systems that are perpetuated from one generation to the next

We must ask why there are such narrow definitions of "real manhood" and where they came from?

Men have had to be strong for societies to survive. In many cultures, men were previously hunters, but aren't anymore. Men still fight and die in most of the wars. Men are expendable and disposable. Since they are considered stronger, they are the supposed protectors. But women now are in the military, and in some countries, serve in combat situations. If the man is not a protector or hunter, then what is he? He provides food, shelter, and clothing. But women are also providers now, so men are not the sole providers.

So, we come to the question of what makes a man a man. It is his genetic make-up, hormones, brain development, and body parts that make him male. Why does there have to be an emotional component that defines him as different from females?

My guess is that **we haven't been willing to accept the fact that little boys are masculine without having to prove anything.** To prove masculinity is to be accepted by a group of peers or adult males as a "true male." This is as opposed to a woman, or a pseudo-male. This proving is based on fear, and controlled by a gender that is fearful that it is not okay. If males feel inadequate, they will put more pressure on younger males to prove adequacy. Shame-based masculinity is fear-based masculinity.

The alternative to this is holistic manhood, when the boy matures into manhood from the inside out. This authentic process, learning about oneself, and then loving what one learns about oneself, would make boys into healthy, whole men. The men who achieved authentic manhood would not be easy to manipulate, dominate, or control. A man would know who he is, what he stands for, and what his life is about. Such men are a threat to shame-based systems and hierarchical structures. They would not need to drink alcohol or drive fancy sportscars to prove manhood.

The following are the traits of healthy manhood. They are:

1. Purpose
2. Power for and with, not over
3. Passion
4. Paternity
5. Piety
6. Persistence
7. Presence
8. Patience
9. Pardon
10. Partnership
11. Pliability
12. Playfulness
13. Peacemaking
14. Politeness
15. Perspective

Knowing one's purpose gives one's life meaning and direction. Whole manhood requires commitment and goal-setting.

Real power is power for others, to help others, and sharing power with others. It involves faith in oneself, assertiveness, and compassion.

Passion is being alive, with vitality, energy, sensuality, healthy sexual energy. It involves cherishing as well as grieving, and allowing oneself to fully connect emotionally.

Paternity involves helping others, children, and animals, mentoring, and stewarding the earth.

Piety is about wonder, gratitude, reverence, humility and spiritual connectedness.

Persistence includes endurance, resilience, responsibility, and follow-through.

Presence means being open, not judging, accepting others, and paying attention.

Patience means delaying gratification, impulse control, and being slow to anger.

Pardon means forgiveness and kindness.

Partnership includes collaboration, community building, and negotiation and compromise.

Pliability is flexibility, openness to change, willingness to see other points of view.

Playfulness is laughter, joy, lightheartedness.

Peacemaking includes justice-seeking, non-violent alternatives, and mediation.

Politeness means have courtesy and manners.

Perspective is being able to see the larger picture.

If we change the “p” in paternity to “m,” we have maternity. Then we could discuss the qualities of healthy holistic womanhood. And guess what? ***Healthy manhood and womanhood involve the same character traits. And, believe it or not, men will not turn into women, and women will not turn into men.***

Holistic manhood and womanhood would create a culture with less pain, less loss, and more interconnectedness. We can teach both boys and girls these traits of emotional and spiritual health through role-modeling and mentoring.

As we move away from shame-based and fear-based masculinity, we will discover that boys who don't have to prove themselves can relax more. Bullying will decrease, as will drug abuse. There will likely be fewer lonely and depressed men and boys, and fewer hostile and aggressive men and boys. Since males won't need females to prove their manhood and sexual prowess, rape and other crimes against women will decrease considerably. Men might live longer because they can admit that they need help from doctors. Healthier relationships, better parenting, and more compassion and empathy would most likely contribute to a better society.

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