

Man-Up :  
Experiences and Learning from  
Working with Men in Therapy

- Men evolved with muscle to demonstrate their health, strength, status and general mate-ability. They needed to be strong to compete for the 'fittest' female, catch and kill the dinner, and repel enemies and predators. However, today's world makes no such demands: the muscular, hunter-gatherer role is redundant.

(Sissons-Greene, 2017)

# BACP Survey 2014

- 84% female
- 16% male
- Average age; 53, works 12-13 hours, earns under £10k per annum
- 9% earn above £30k
  
- UKCP (2016) reported 74% female practitioners

# Men Coming to Therapy

A research study (Noyes, 2007) came up with the following findings;

- Making decision to start therapy was very difficult and involved years of deliberation.
- Final decision involved encouragement by important others and an acceptance that their problem was serious enough to warrant attending.
- Subjects were surprisingly uninformed about true nature of therapy and the majority based their impressions solely on those gathered from the media.
- Attempt to gain knowledge by researching before initial session, but still often arrive with little information.

# Men Coming to Therapy cont...

- Amount of emotional energy taken to attend first appointment was very high and frequently considered not attending.
- There was high awareness of the counselling centre location and self-consciousness about being seen going in.
- Participants continued to feel conflicted about therapy even after several weeks.
- They also reported gaining a lot from their experiences. Relationship with therapist is seen as crucial to positive experiences.
- Despite positive gains, many participants indicated that they would prefer not to attend again in future. They preferred idea of taking care of problems on their own.
- Overall, general impression of therapy has improved.

# Male Hierarchy Systems

An example of a hierarchy from my own childhood (around 11 yrs old – primary 7)

- 1 best footballer (or all sports)
- 2 best fighter (non-bully)
- 3 richest (best toys)
- 4 best looking (more experience w/girls)
- 5 best artist (we'd say drawer)

This is just the top 5, there are others.

# Male Hierarchy System

- Suggesting that socialisation occurs within a recognition/rewards system
- Everyone has to show a talent or make a contribution, *even if it's the best shoplifter*, to fit in
- No award for most empathic boy, most gentle boy, most neglected boy ..... Or most feminine boy.

# Defining a Man

- Men may define masculinity (theirs & others) based on definitions that have been integrated through their experiences of socialisation
- A measure of the constructed misogyny men are born into *and maintain* is their fear of being labelled by their peers as sissy/girly/gay/feminine (ergo, as low as women)

# Socially Constructed Man: The Struggle to Fit the Traditional Model

- To earn more than his wife
- To make the powerful decisions
- To comply with wife's decisions around the house
- To control the Finances
- To be skilled in role of handyman, fixer, driver,
- To be unemotional (considered strong)
- To be physically powerful
- To substitute for wife during illness
- To be sexually powerful
- To be an expert in 'manuage' – *men's language* ie fully briefed in issues of football, sports, projects, road map-routes etc but not the arts or humanities.



# What other issues arise?

- Powerlessness
- Anger (Powerlessness often shown as anger)
- Loss
- Fear
- Existential/Self Doubt (what am I for?)
- Sexual Dysfunction/Willy size/Performance anxiety
- Growing attraction to violence
- Incongruence (Upbringing vs Modern Reality)
- Sex/Porn

# Working with Porn

- Guardian Survey 2014; 76% of men admit using porn
- Some clients present porn as therapy issue; addiction/worrying interests
- Some clients, especially younger clients just use a lot of porn
- Porn can be a gateway into understanding;
- How do you see the women in porn? Sex objects? Idealised lovers? Sources of power? Targets for rage?
- How do you see the men in porn? Idealised physical self? Secret objects of sexual desire? Objects of intimacy.

# Risks of Porn

- Addictive (often escalation & hurtful porn)
- Time loss
- Disturbed sexual expectation especially in unexperienced men/boys
- An avoidance of the real thing; sexual experience without intimacy
- Cause anxiety around sexual performance/body image/penis size
- Shame

# Working with Resistance

- I expect avoidance, *male-storytelling*, small talk, charm, gadget-talk (cars, iphones etc) and I meet this patiently but also transparently
  - *“I could talk about cars all day but what’s happening for me right now is.....”*
- I don’t always assume avoidance. Often, men will use humour, daft-behaviour, childishness, even rambling, as a way to achieve intimacy
- Intimacy is a language and if they don’t speak it, they have to learn it

# Working with Resistance

- When a man freezes up in response to an invitation to express feelings, I validate this: *“it seems like you’ve gone blank right now – that happens to me in therapy too”*
- A male therapist can normalise using self-disclosure  
*“as guys we’re really not conditioned to speak like this are we? It’s hard for me too sometimes”*
- A female therapist can normalise through disclosing personal experiences of men, previous clients etc
- “Shame is our enemy and self-disclosure often defuses shame” (Wexler, 2009)

# Working with Resistance

- If necessary, I use a 'triangle' approach. Face-to-face talking can seem too intimate, frightening confrontational, even aggressive. Potential for triggering terror/trauma.
- To ease this, I offer drawing, playing, walking around the room, looking out the window, Occasionally the dog.
- I allow hiding; Turning the chair. Cushions and blankets available. Working with Shame.

# Addressing Shame and Stigma

- I meet him where he is unconditionally.
- If the client sees counselling as a project, I join him – validating it as a piece of work, not just a process
- Activity; Agreeing Goals; offering Homework e.g. journal writing, drawing, exercise. Some men thrive on things to do outside therapy
- If the client wants to call it *Coaching*, I go along with it – this could be what he's telling his partner, friends etc

# Addressing Shame and Stigma

- I strive towards equality in the relationship and make it explicit. I ask permission to swear, I own my messy desk, I'm usually in my socks. This is my authentic self
- I point out that their money is my living
- If they raise addiction I can disclose my own experience of addiction to nicotine
- Using Triangles
- Co-operating is not colluding

# Transparency above Mystery

- I don't dance around questions. If the client asks me a direct questions that requires disclosure, I either answer or explain why I won't.
- Experience has taught me never to meet a question with "I hear your question and I'm interested in why you're asking that..." I avoid being mysterious.

# To End...

- “Sometimes, how you ingest this idea of Masculinity as projected onto you by the world could be the difference of life and death”
- (Barry Jenkins, Writer and Academy Award Winner 2016 for ‘Moonlight’)
  
- “Well, the tyranny of masculinity and the tyranny of patriarchy I think has been much more deadly to men than it has to women. It hasn’t killed our hearts. It’s killed men’s hearts. It’s silenced them; it’s cut them off”
- (Eve Ensler, Author of ‘The Vagina Monologues’, 1996)

# References

- Noyes, B (2007) *A qualitative examination of men's therapy decision-making processes and therapy experiences*. Salt Lake City. University of Utah
- Sisson-Greene, N (2017) *Muscle-bound man* Therapy Today, Volume 28, Issue 5
- Wrexler, D B (2009) *Men in therapy*. London. Norton & Co Ltd