Masculinity: don't demonise it, use it

Phil Mitchell argues the case for why 'archetypal' rather than 'toxic' masculinity is a more helpful term

Ask anyone what word comes after 'toxic', and 'masculinity' will almost certainly spring to mind, it's that much a part of everyday headlines, talking panels and think pieces. I recognise how the term became popularised (in my view problematically), but is it a *helpful* term for us as therapists? Might there be aspects of what we're deeming 'toxicity' that we could actually harness to help us better support men?

Masculinity, as a characteristic, isn't exclusive to men: men can be feminine; women can be masculine. That doesn't make masculinity implicitly wrong. You might think that's stating the obvious, but public discourse would have us believe otherwise. A recent YouGov survey asked if masculinity is inherently bad; and opinion pieces have suggested that 'masculinity is crippling society'; and we should consider 'getting rid of masculinity altogether'.[1-3] This impacts how men are accessing help.

Messaging

In 2019 the American Psychological Association was criticised for its guidance on working with men and boys, suggesting that traditional masculine ideology inherently harms men.[4,5] In schools, 'toxic masculinity' is often used as a way into encouraging boys to open up.[6] I'm all for boys expressing their emotions if they want to, but do we have to teach them, as schools are doing, that not doing so is inherently toxic for society?[7] What do we think this messaging is doing to young minds? The idea that silence in men is toxic is so pervasive that toxic masculinity has been blamed for why suicide rates are higher in men – despite research indicating that male suicide stems from a combination of interrelated socioeconomic and systemic factors making them especially vulnerable – and has been used to explain why men aren't engaging with mental health services.[8-10] In my professional view and experience of working with men, I don't think *masculinity* is behind men not engaging with mental health; rather I'd argue that it's the *language of therapy* itself that isn't satisfactorily serving this demographic and creating barriers to some men feeling able to access help.

Barriers to help

It seems to me that masculinity is becoming something we are collectively permitted to mock, like entertainment clickbait, which in my view only makes it harder for impacted men to feel safe enough to come to therapy. The extent of this hit home for me when I read an article in *The Guardian* asking, without irony, whether 'toxic masculinity' was to blame for our urban landscape design, referring to cities as sexist by virtue of their upward-thrusting buildings 'ejaculating into the sky'.[11] Again, is this helpful?

Whatever the argued intentions behind toxic masculinity debates, it's my belief that framing such dialogue within the language of 'toxicity' is counterproductive and only serves to further alienate men and boys. This isn't just my opinion: men and boys repeatedly report in my practice that they are absorbing clear societal messaging that expressions of masculinity are inherently harmful (only when displayed by men), while expressions of femininity are comparatively encouraged and embraced as harmless (even in cases where they've caused harm). The knock-on effect isn't just me sitting here disgruntled; this has serious, genuine, evidenced ramifications for our therapy practice and profession.

Harmful language

A 2025 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Men and Boys' Issues suggests that 'toxic masculinity' is indeed harmful terminology with a consequence of leading many young boys to feel demonised, neglected, invisible or unfairly labelled as problematic.[12] Far from engaging with the term at all, they are switching off. Surely this isn't what we want? Simply, if the intention of the term were to encourage men and boys to sit up and engage in discussions about harms perpetrated by men and boys, the opposite is happening. So what purpose does the term serve? If boys feel defensive on hearing it, why double down?[13] If hearing it results in men feeling that they're being told it's 'bad' to be a man, don't we have some duty to reach men differently?[14]

A British Psychological Society briefing paper recommends that any terminology that puts masculinity in a negative light should be discouraged.[15] A 2020 study exploring masculinity showed that 85% of participants thought the term was insulting, even harmful, and crucially, unlikely to help men's behaviour.[16] Further research shows that men believing 'masculinity' is bad for them actively contributes to poor mental health.[17] Men are more likely to cut off therapy if they feel emasculated in sessions.[18] So what's the solution?

Archetypal masculinity

Perhaps our attention could turn to a reframing of what psychologist Seager terms 'archetypal masculinity', which is

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what we're really referring to.[19] Archetypal masculinity valorises attributes of fighting, winning, providing, protecting, mastery and control. These are traits that many men have from a young age, influenced by both environment and biology – the former we tend to focus on and the latter we often tend to ignore. The traits aren't inherently 'wrong': certainly they can be used for ill, but if channelled correctly they can provide great value to society. Indeed, Seager once told me that masculinity could be likened to a hammer: it has the power to kill, or it can be used to build a house. The hammer itself isn't toxic.

Heartbreakingly I feel there has been so much emphasis on the *negative* aspects of these traits that little to no focus is given on how they can offer meaningful and positive contributions to society. Moreover, these elements of archetypal masculinity are the very aspects we need to tap into when working with archetypal male clients.

Therapeutic approach

A common reason men in my practice report disengaging with previous therapy is a lack of connection with the therapist and a sense that therapy doesn't nurture progress. Traditional therapy approaches tend to emphasise talking and emotional expression. There's nothing wrong with this per se, but it's wrong to presume that one approach should work for all and does a disservice to some men.

I have found leaning into the archetypal masculinity traits of my male clients – by using *action-oriented* language – has been incredibly effective. In fact, male mental health psychologists Barry and colleagues validated the action-oriented approach as a helpful methodology for working with male clients.[19] Before then I'd wondered whether I was doing something unethical by not adopting traditional therapeutic approaches (rooted in exploration of feelings and emotional expression) wholesale as I was trained to do. But now I know that my approach is research tested, safe, legal, ethical and – perhaps most importantly – *helpful* to this client group. Isn't that what we're here to be?

Marketing

Once I changed the wording on my website away from emotion-focused language to language of control, action and problem solving, I experienced a rapid spike in men contacting me for therapy – something men have found a challenge to do historically in this profession – and subsequently reporting positive outcomes.

Rather than encouraging men to sit with silence and vulnerability (excruciating for many), perhaps we can lean into improving our understanding of how boys and men require therapy that feels natural for them. Instead of working against what feels instinctive for them, we can raise their awareness of the strength and resilience their being allows them to possess within their own expression of masculinity that can be used for good (in ways that might never have even occurred to them).

This client group responds well to language of 'fighting' and 'conquering' problems, which offers them purpose. Instead of focusing on their *helplessness* we can explore what actions the client can take control of. Using elements of archetypal masculinity to reframe the male client's perspective in this way is incredibly effective when working with many boys and men.

I'm certainly not saying this approach works with every male client (just as I believe a solely emotion-focused approach doesn't), but I consistently see how many men engage with it. I now incorporate it regularly into my practice and deliver nationwide webinars on how to adapt therapy to make it more accessible to men. It's been especially powerful for boys and men who have been sexually abused and exploited; leaning into the usefulness of archetypal masculinity traits helps them deal with the effects of this abuse. By embracing elements of archetypal masculinity through action-oriented interventions that speak to them, we only serve to increase the likelihood of boys and men not just engaging in therapy but benefitting from it. ●

'The idea that silence in men is toxic is so pervasive that toxic masculinity has been blamed for why suicide rates are higher in men'

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