

Why are men emotionally tongue-tied?

Think of the primary male role-model in your life; perhaps your father, grandfather, or uncle. Now take out a pen and write down five adjectives you would use to describe his personality. What did you come up with? Chances are good the words sensitive, affectionate, expressive, emotional, or vulnerable were not on your list.

For many of us, our male role-models didn't often show open caring or vulnerable emotions. Rarely, if ever, would we see them cry or admit to feeling scared. In fact, if they showed any emotion at all, it was probably anger.

Women frequently complain that men are not in touch with their feelings. When men don't know how to respond to their own sadness or fear they may ignore these feelings or say the wrong thing when they see them in others, such as: "You're overreacting" or "Stop being so emotional." While they are quick to give advice, men are not as skilled as women in the art of empathic listening or lending emotional support.

According to University of Akron psychologist Dr. Ronald Levant, editor of "A New Psychology of Men" (Basic Books, 1995), men come by these emotional deficits honestly. Dr. Levant says that boys are socialized to restrict their expression of emotions. Studies show that both mothers and fathers actively discourage male children from expressing vulnerable feelings and may even punish them when they do. At the same time, boys are encouraged to express anger, often through competition, and are viciously teased by their peers if they show any signs of "weakness." This social conditioning leads to a condition Dr. Levant calls "alexithymia", which translates from its Greek and Latin roots to mean: "without words for emotions".

Men are not born emotionally tongue-tied. Research shows that until age 2 boys are even more emotionally expressive than girls. However, over time a boy's emotional sensitivity is gradually stripped away. Thus your male role-model is likely the product of years of emotional repression encouraged by parents and peers.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE



DR. BRAD KLONTZ

Clinical psychologist

He was instructed at an early age that "real men" are tough, stoic, and do not show sadness or fear. This condition goes beyond causing problems in relationships. Research shows that extreme alexithymia is associated with illness, substance abuse, and mental disorders, and may be part of the reason men die younger than women.

In recent years, male gender-roles have been shifting. Increasingly men are assisting with the caretaking of children and are required to communicate more frequently. Women want men to be more affectionate, expressive, and relationally focused than in previous generations, and men want to be freer to do so. In a recent article,

Hiroko Tabuchi of the Associated Press identifies a similar trend in Japan, where divorces are escalating as women frustrated with years of neglect from their husbands begin asking themselves whether or not they are happy. In response, a growing number of Japanese men are joining groups dedicated to teaching them how to show love and appreciation for their wives, often through frequent expressions of gratitude, asking about their days, and saying "I love you."

Dr. Levant has dedicated much of his work to helping men recover their lost sensitivity to emotions. He offers the following steps to men wishing to recover from alexithymia:

1. Develop a vocabulary for emotions. Since men tend to not be aware of emotions, they often don't have a good vocabulary of feelings words. To develop a vocabulary for the full spectrum of emotions,


particularly the vulnerable and caring ones, Dr. Levant suggests men make a list of as many words for feelings as possible.

2. Learn to read the emotions of others. The next step involves learning to connect feeling words to emotional states. Since at first it is less threatening to practice this with others than with oneself, and since men can benefit from learning emotional empathy skills, Dr. Levant recommends men first focus on learning to read the emotions of others. He suggests men practice reading facial expressions, tones of voice, and other types of body language and practice identifying the emotional states the person is experiencing. Ask questions

during this process such as: What is he feeling? What does this feel like from her perspective? If you are talking to a loved one, I suggest you reflect back what you think he or she may be feeling and then check to see if you are correct: "It sounds like you are feeling sad. Is that right?" (Caution: If this is the first feeling you have ever reflected back to your wife, make sure you have some smelling salts handy.)

3. Keep an emotional response log. Dr. Levant's third step helps you apply emotional words to your own experience through the use of an emotional response log. At the first sign of a feeling, bodily

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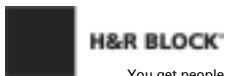
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