

Men and Emotions

by Vic LeBouthillier

A candid, heart-to-heart talk about men, emotions and physical health

When it comes to emotional intelligence, we guys have to take our hats off to the ladies. In nearly all of the components that make up emotional intelligence, emotional awareness, processing of emotions, empathy and transparency, women have a definite edge.

Dozens of studies show that men have a harder time figuring out how others feel. Men are less sure of what they themselves feel, and rarely conduct the kind of emotional self-examinations that women do on a regular basis. Even in today's cultural climate, which encourages men to be more sensitive and to give healthy expression to their emotions, the majority of men still have a subconscious fear of dropping their guard and exposing their emotional selves.

Although part of the problem may be due to the fact that men are hardwired with different emotional equipment than women, it's mostly attributable to the way males were/are raised. The parents of baby boomers emphasized self-control above all else and taught their male offspring that showing emotions was not something big boys did. Consequently, most of us grew up with the idea that repressing our emotions meant we were being good, and thus gave us a sense of validation.

Emotionally speaking, men live far more isolated lives than women and tend to lean heavily on their spouses or female partners for emotional support (often with unrealistic expectations). As a result, we have fewer opportunities to observe emotions in others, or to gain the perspective of our peers on their own emotional state.

But it's a myth that we live life from the neck up. We may put on a poker face, but that doesn't mean we don't feel or crave emotional connection and the richness that comes with a fully embraced emotional life.

For many men, the struggle lies in giving themselves permission to want heightened emotional awareness and expression. We need to remember that emotional intelligence helps us use emotions for better thinking and cognitive activity, while understanding and interpreting emotions can help us respond ap-

propriately and positively to workplace outburst that might otherwise turn into destructive confrontations.

Having someone thoroughly understand us is an innately human desire. But achieving strong personal connections requires an honest admission of vulnerability and need – something that makes those still hung up on old-fashioned notions of masculinity intensely uncomfortable. They'd rather hang onto the mask.

What they don't realize is that we cannot, in fact, subdue our emotions. Sometimes repressed emotions manifest themselves in unwholesome behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity, alcohol or drug abuse, workaholism, religious fanaticism or eruptions of anger. Or they debilitate our lives in less dramatic ways—depression, loss of purpose, insomnia—which hampers work performance or prevents us from achieving our full potential, often without us ever realizing the root cause.

Now, for the good news: the tide is turning. In recent years, the need for men to become emotionally healthier has taken on greater urgency and has become widely recognized among men themselves. There are two main reasons for this trend:

First, there is growing evidence that there is a strong relationship between emotions and physical health—evidence that is forcing men to take their feelings just as seriously as they would nutrition or exercise. Second, the concept of emotional intelligence has hit the traditionally male domain of business in a big way. Studies show that emotionally intelligent people do far better in the corporate arena than their less emotionally attuned peers who may have higher IQs. Emotional health has become a key factor in business.

Any way you look at it, guys, the best self-improvement regimen for your physical health, relationships and career is attending to your emotional health. And it starts with the simple acknowledgement that every man has the same intrinsic need as a woman for emotional expression and connection. It's just a little harder for us, ladies, so we could use your help.