How Can We Encourage Healthier Alternative Masculinities?

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Introduction

Men account for approximately 75% of suicide deaths and 75% of substance use disorder cases (Affleck et al. 2018). These disproportionately high rates have been linked to unhealthy masculinities, which have been repeatedly associated with other negative health outcomes such as gambling, aggression, and risk-taking behaviors (Noel et al. 2025; Lainas & Kouimtsidis 2022; Hardoon & Derevensky 2001). Therefore, it is important for communities to consider how to encourage healthier alternative masculinities. Masculinity and femininity are sets of qualities and attributes associated with men and women, respectively. Masculinity and femininity are not necessarily tied to biological sex, but they are instead closely related to gender identities. Studies have shown that masculinity and femininity do not exist as opposites, but instead as social constructs that align with gender stereotypes and expectations for behavior (Marusic & Bratko, 1998). Gendered behaviors and stereotypes can be tied to harmful ideologies about masculinity and femininity, which creates rigid expectations for how individuals should act and personality traits they should possess (Marusic & Bratko, 1998). Toxic masculinities are encouraged by society through a combination of cultural norms, media portrayals, and socialization that discourages men from showing emotions by creating a narrative that aligns masculinity with strength, control, and aggression (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). The perpetuation of these stereotypes encourages similarly unhealthy behaviors that serve to maintain the feeling of strength, control, and aggression that has been made to feel like a requirement of masculinity.This paper instead examines ways to encourage healthy masculinities, which are forms of masculinity that support positive behavior.

Though there is abundant evidence of a correlation between unhealthy masculinities and negative health outcomes, there has yet to be sufficient evidence that masculinities are the cause

of these negative health outcomes and not the consequence of them. This information is important when considering how to practically tackle these negative outcomes. There has also been a significant lack of data about this effect on the adolescent population. It is difficult to say whether or not current data on adult populations can be accurately generalized to a younger population. This paper aims to explore healthier alternative masculinities, as well as how we can encourage them during youth. We will delve into what current masculinities look like and what impacts they have, explore what we currently know about healthy masculinities, and summarize the existing literature on how to encourage positive masculinities and provide suggestions for how to do so.

Establishing current masculinity

Masculinity and femininity

The concept of masculinity does not exist in isolation, but rather in dynamic relation to femininity. There are many ways to define masculinity and femininity, and many ways to compare the two, one of which being through measures of personality (Marusic & Bratko 1998). Previous research has examined the relationship between personality traits of masculinity and femininity, specifically using a five-factor model of personality dimensions, including openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Marusic & Bratko 1998). Some masculine traits in the measures used include analytical, assertive, and competitive, while some feminine traits included compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings, and lack of harsh language (Marusic & Bratko 1998). This research found that there are psychologically established characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity. Masculinity was found to have a positive correlation to extraversion and conscientiousness, and negatively to neuroticism and agreeableness (Marusic & Bratko 1998). On the other hand, this study found that femininity was

found to have a positive relationship with agreeableness. This study is effective in establishing psychological differences in characteristics between masculine and feminine personalities.

Gendered behavior and stereotypes are linked with toxic ideology surrounding masculinity and femininity (Marusic & Bratko, 1998). In a study conducted in Croatia with high-school students, it was supported that masculinity and femininity are not believed to be opposites, but rather separate constructs that follow gender stereotypes (Marusic & Bratko, 1998). In alignment with stereotypes, the study found females to have higher scores in neuroticism and agreeableness than male participants (Marusic & Bratko, 1998). This difference in likeliness of experiencing negative emotions displays the commonly held idea that men do not or should not feel or express strong emotions. Encouraging young boys and men to suppress emotions and hold them in can create issues with regulating emotions and accepting that those feelings exist and that they do not violate manhood (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022).

Unhealthy views of masculinity

There are many complex factors that impact masculinity and how it manifests in men. The social construction of masculinity is often restrictive, meaning that there is a rigid expectation of how "manliness" is defined and it is often tied to harmful stereotypical beliefs (Noel et al. 2025). Another common yet unhealthy view of masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, which can be defined as masculinity that focuses on maintaining power, sometimes expressed through means of competitiveness, aggression, misogyny, or homophobia (Lainas & Kouimtsidis 2022; Sloan et al. 2010). This view of masculinity has also been linked to unhealthy behaviors like addiction (Lainas & Kouimtsidis 2022). These findings show us that the way in which we view masculinity impacts how masculinity manifests itself.

Factors that impact masculinity

Masculinity is also impacted by external factors, such as peer influence. Men have been proven to be more susceptible to peer pressure (Hardoon & Derevensky 2001). When men feel that their masculinity is threatened by others, they are more likely to overcompensate by conforming more strongly to stereotypical masculinity (Mills & McCreary 2023). These stereotypes include being powerful and domineering. Pornography similarly influences notions of masculinity by promoting unrealistic and often harmful ideals about sex, dominance, and relationships. Mainstream pornography often reinforces gender stereotypes, featuring men in a dominating position over women. Men who view pornography have been shown to be more likely to endorse, or actually engage, in aggression towards women (Richardson 2019).

Consequences of Toxic Masculinity

Precarious manhood and the pressure to conform

Toxic masculinities are encouraged by society and discourage men from showing emotions by creating a narrative that aligns masculinity with strength, control, and aggression (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Shaming or diminishing feelings and emotions invalidates men's experiences and contributes to poor mental health outcomes (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). A study from Noel et al. (2025) found that men who identify with a restrictive view of masculinity were more likely to report negative health behaviors associated with unhealthy masculinity, most notably illicit substance abuse. Additionally, the theory of precarious manhood suggests that manhood is a fragile status tied to social standing, fostering an environment where males compare themselves to one another, which can further intensify feelings of inferiority (Mills et al., 2023).

The belief that masculinity must be earned, rather than being an inherent trait, intensifies the pressure to appear more masculine to others (Mills et al., 2023). In a study conducted by

Mills and colleagues, one group of males was assigned a distinction of masculinity where they felt their manliness was threatened, while the other was given neutral feedback that did not align with gendered stereotypes of masculinity (Mills et al., 2023). After participating in a cognitive test, the first group of young adult males was told phrases that encourage unhealthy masculinity, such as addressing their potential for earning money in the future, and was intended to alter their perception of their own masculinity in comparison to other participants (Mills et al., 2023). However, the other group was given neutral feedback that had no correlation to gender or masculinity expectations (Mills et al., 2023). The study found that men experience societal pressure to express their masculinity in specific ways and when this masculinity is challenged, they often respond by overcompensating and more strongly adhering to stereotypes and societal expectations (Mills et al., 2023).

Peer/family influence on risk-taking behavior

Influence from peers and mentors contributes to perceptions of masculinity, as well as to risk-taking behaviors. Examining the consequences of negative masculinities on the development of risk-taking behavior illustrates how the environment and interactions of adolescents and young adults shape the decisions they make. In a study conducted by Hardoon and colleagues found that adolescents who came from homes where their parents gambled viewed it as positive and were therefore more likely to participate themselves (Hardoon et al., 2001). Traditional masculine traits, such as the expectation to appear tough and suppress emotions, are often reinforced in everyday interactions with peers, parents, and other adults (Hardoon et al., 2001). These ideals have been linked to harmful behaviors and poor decision-making, including a higher risk of substance abuse (Noel et al., 2025) and gambling (Lamont & Hing, 2018).

Digital medias and health risks

Societal stereotypes addressing masculinity and femininity can also influence risk-taking behaviors by encouraging individuals to conform to previously conceived notions of "manhood" by perpetuating violence and harm as masculine (Gilbert et al., 2018). For men, a particularly common hobby that impacts their psychological wellbeing is video game usage. A study conducted on young adults that examined the connection between video game usage and risk-taking behaviors found that violent video game playing has been linked to an increase in delinquency and juvenile offenders (Gilbert et al., 2018). Video games have grown in popularity in the youth population, despite including violent content and improper depictions of the real-world (Gilbert et al., 2018). Playing these video games impacts youth perceptions of reality and of masculinity, which is connected to participation in risky behaviors that can impact health and well-being (Gilbert et al., 2018). This study by Gilbert and colleagues closely examined the link between playing video games and substance use, as well as the correlation to juvenile delinquency, which includes minor and moderate crime (Gilbert et al., 2018). The results of this study found that content in video games that portray violence, aggression, substance use, and poor depictions of masculinity increase the likelihood of adolescents participating in these behaviors and believing the content they consume through the game, poorly impacting health and decision-making skills (Gilbert et al., 2018).

Health costs of conformity

Societal costs related to toxic masculinities include public health implications and worsened health outcomes. A study by Noel and colleagues investigated the connection between restrictive masculinity and adverse health outcomes and decision-making (Noel et al., 2025). Restrictive masculinity refers to societal expectations of manhood and reflects outdated gender stereotypes as ideal behavior (Noel et al., 2025). Males who feel restricted by masculine ideals

and feel pressured to fit this narrative of manhood have shown poor mental health outcomes and are more likely to develop "masculine depression," which differs from feelings of sadness and instead involves suppression of emotions and numbness to feelings (Noel et al., 2025). Suppressing emotions and feeling pressured to hold in feelings can invalidate male experiences and can encourage negative coping mechanisms, putting males in a vulnerable state and increasing their risk of participating in unhealthy behaviors (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022).

Healthier alternative masculinities

This background on unhealthy masculinities provides a foundation to examine what healthier masculinities look like in order to identify what it is that should be encouraged. It has been previously established that unhealthy masculinities are often based on the narrative that men should be powerful and controlling. In order to consider healthier masculinities, we should consider masculinities that do not require power or control in order to be considered valid. It is also important to consider that masculinities can be authoritative without being controlling, and powerful while still being compassionate. Contrasting characteristics should also be considered, such as trusting, respectful of others, and empowering.

There are other traits that should be considered when forming a concept of healthy masculinity. Cerdán-Torregrosa et al. (2025) defines the term positive masculinity as an umbrella term that includes masculinities that are inclusive, non-violent, equitable, empathetic, and actively promote gender justice (para. 3). We can incorporate these ideas of positive masculinity into our idea of alternative healthier masculinities.

To elaborate on this working definition of healthy masculinity, additional research from Sloan et al. (2010) has shown that men who engage in positive health behaviors, such as exercise and low substance usage, frame their behaviors differently due to their identity as males.

Specifically, masculinity plays a large role in how they account for their health-promoting practices. Health itself was found to be viewed as a feminine concept by men, likely due to adjacent concepts (such as being nurturing or caring) often being associated with femininity. Consequently, men were shown to frame their behaviors in ways that they perceived to be more masculine. For example, some of the terms men attributed their practices to include action-orientation, sporting targets, appearance concerns, and being autonomous (Sloan et al. 2010; para. 1). These traits can be considered traits of healthier masculinities. These findings give insight into the aspects of masculinity that can be positively utilized as tools to promote healthy behaviors. Framing health behaviors in a way that is most comfortable for the average man may be useful in promoting said health behaviors.

Encouraging Healthier Masculinities

Early childhood interventions

Researchers studying the impacts of harmful masculinities recommend early-age interventions as key solutions. Hardoon and colleagues conducted a study that surveyed adolescent feelings toward gambling, social implications of participating in gambling, and frequency of participation in gambling (Hardoon et al., 2001). The authors of this study suggest that early childhood interventions could help reduce the risk of participating in gambling as children grow older, as well as educate children and adolescents on methods for challenging societal norms that often contribute to risk-taking behavior (Hardoon et al., 2001). A preventative approach that uses education and interventions to reshape societal narratives around masculinity can reduce the likelihood of adolescents engaging in risk-taking behaviors to conform or meet societal expectations. Encouraging relationships with mentors and trusted adults from a young age can act as the foundation for promoting healthy masculinity by creating a safe

space for emotional expression (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Empathetic relationships that encourage vulnerability help men and boys feel safe to express themselves and question gender norms, promoting the breakdown of negative masculinities (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Interventions of this nature help adolescents unpack negative masculinities and unlearn gender stereotypes.

Education intervention

Promoting healthier forms of masculinity can take many different approaches and should be tailored to the specific needs and context of the individuals or adolescent groups involved. With that said, no matter the target population, preventive education and informative approaches tend to be successful in many scenarios. In a study conducted in Spain by Cerdán-Torregrosa and colleagues, it was revealed that educating males on positive masculinities, both formally and informally, reduces violence rates against women by providing healthy avenues for expressing emotions and anger (Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025). Participants of this study also provided feedback by stating that other helpful actions for promoting healthier masculinities include providing support to social organizations and engaging in personal work with men (Cerdán--Torregrosa, 2025). School-based education interventions, including classroom workshops and interactive activities, challenge stereotypes and encourage emotional expression to rewrite societal expectations of masculinity (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021). Interventions that actively engage youth in group discussions and activities promote reflection and dialogue about masculinity norms and expectations, creating a supportive space to learn positive ways of expressing masculinity (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021).

Narrative writing for expression

A unique intervention option that has proven helpful in encouraging healthier masculinities includes sharing personal narratives and stories relating to experiences with gender stereotypes and masculinities (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019). Taking place originally in San Francisco, California, the Men's Story Project encouraged healthier masculinities by fostering an environment of open communication and a safe space for sharing personal stories and experiences that challenge gender norms (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019). Interventions like these provide adolescents with a safe and supportive environment among peers, allowing them to openly reflect on how their personal experiences align with societal norms and traditional masculine ideals, while also encouraging them to challenge and grow beyond these norms (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019). Personal writing and narrative storytelling help males reflect on traditional expectations of masculinity while providing the chance to challenge such norms (Schermer, 2013). Narrative writing is a strategy for exploring identity and processing emotions, serving as an outlet for self-expression that can help challenge toxic masculinities and promote healthier coping strategies (Schermer, 2013). Healthy expression of masculinity is important during developmental years and interventions that begin early, such as encouraging narrative writing in adolescents, assists in fostering environments where healthy expression is welcomed and stereotypes are challenged (Schermer, 2013).

Conclusion

Studies have shown that the environment and peer influence impact the perception of masculinities and the likelihood of adolescents participating in risk-taking behaviors (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Noel et al., 2025). Masculinity exists as a social construct that encourages males to suppress emotions and feed into gendered stereotypes, such as displaying anger and aggression (Marusic & Bratko 1998). Toxic masculinity and the portrayal of manhood in society

is linked to increases in risk-taking behaviors such as participating in gambling (Lamont & Hing, 2018) and substance abuse scenarios (Noel et al., 2025). Gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms also influence ideas of masculinity and femininity, and the internalization of characteristics associated with each social construct (Gilbert et al., 2018).

Encouraging positive masculinities through education interventions and social groups can help decrease instances of risk-taking behavior and empower young males to challenge traditional norms and expectations of masculinity (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019; Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025). Fast Forward can implement interventions of this style to support adolescents in reframing their perception of masculinity and to learn strategies for healthy expression of emotions. Environments where emotional expression is welcomed and encouraged fosters positive masculinities and challenges societal expectations of masculinity (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019; Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Specific childhood interventions at Fast Forward, such as classroom instruction and activities that target negative masculinities can educate adolescents and provide the tools for learning healthy masculinities (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021). Narrative writing is a skill that helps children and adolescents learn unique ways to express emotions and channel feelings that are vulnerable, rewriting masculinity and allowing for healthier coping mechanisms (Schermer, 2013). The success of these interventions display the importance of options that help channel emotions and provide strategies for understanding and expressing these emotions while challenging stereotypes.

Despite these connections between societal expectations of masculinity and adolescent risk-taking behavior, there is work to be done in uncovering the best ways to encourage healthier masculinities and ways to make education interventions more widespread and available. For example, there is limited research on young boys and their experiences with masculinity. Due to

ethical concerns, it is more difficult to gather data from participants under the age of eighteen, so most of our findings include participants exclusively over the age of eighteen. It is likely that this data from adults can be somewhat generalized to a younger population, but we cannot generalize completely**.** Researchers recommend conducting more research on younger populations and how masculinity manifests for them, as well as how the manifestations of their masculinity change as they age. Another gap in current research is that there is a lack of data proving a causal relationship between masculinity norms and certain behaviors. There is much existing research proving various correlations, but there is a significant need for further research that can suggest causation between these variables.

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