Encouraging Healthier Alternative Masculinities

Introduction

Masculinity is widely considered to be the qualities or attributes associated with men. There are different categories of masculinity, such as healthy and unhealthy masculinities. Research has shown that unhealthy masculinities are associated with negative health behaviors, such as substance abuse, gambling, and risk-taking behavior (Noel et al. 2025; Lainas & Kouimtsidis 2022; Hardoon & Derevensky 2001). This correlation shows society's tendency to encourage toxic masculinity through socialization of men, media portrayals, and cultural norms. These toxic masculinities support the narrative that masculine behavior inherently requires strength, control, and aggression (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Another unhealthy form of masculinity is restrictive masculinity, which defines masculinity as rigid and inflexible in nature. Similarly, hegemonic masculinity, which can be defined as masculinity that focuses on maintaining power, sometimes expressed through means of competitiveness and aggression, is associated with negative health outcomes like addiction (Lainas & Kouimtsidis 2022; Sloan et al. 2010). All of these types of masculinities have been associated with negative health outcomes, most notably illicit substance use.

There have been many attempts at interventions to reduce negative health impacts due to unhealthy masculinities. Educational interventions have been shown to be effective in reducing negative behavior associated with toxic masculinity (Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021). Expressive writing interventions have also shown promising results (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019; Schermer, 2013). Some researchers have examined early childhood interventions as a potential solution, as implementing healthier mindsets from a young age has been shown to

reduce the likelihood of risk-taking behaviors and promote the breakdown of negative masculinities (Hardoon et al., 2001; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022).

Interventions

Studies examining interventions in adolescence and childhood have shown that education and interaction with others are strategies that encourage healthier masculinities by breaking down barriers and challenging traditional stereotypes (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019; Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Specific childhood interventions, such as education in school settings and group activities that encourage discussions that openly discuss stereotypes help adolescents feel more comfortable sharing their experiencing and expressing emotions (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021). Positive environments that promote sharing personal stories and narratives challenge negative masculinities and provide an outlet for healthy self-expression (Schermer, 2013). Preventative approaches that incorporate education and interventions for reshaping societal ideas of masculinity can reduce the likelihood of engaging in risk-taking behaviors.

Studies have shown the positive outcomes of interventions in adolescents and the relationship between masculinities and expressing emotions, however, there are areas where research is still lacking. There is limited research and studies on young boys and their experiences with masculinity, and because of ethical concerns, gathering data on this demographic is difficult. While it can be implied that data from adults can be generalized in some ways for adolescents, it is not able to be fully representative of the youth population. Many authors recommend more research is done on younger populations and specifically with adolescents to truly uncover how they are impacted by masculinity and societal standards. Additionally, due to limited research on the causal relationship between masculinity and certain

risk-taking behaviors, further studies are recommended to better establish and understand this connection. Previous research details correlations between masculinity expectations and risk-taking behaviors, though more research is necessary to prove a definitive causation between the two.

Successful Solutions

A variety of interventions have been successful in reducing toxic masculinities and encouraging healthier forms of expression. Informative approaches through education have proven to help reframe ideas of masculinity in men. In a study in Spain conducted by Cerdán-Torregrosa and colleagues, it was found that educating males on positive masculinities and providing support through social organizations helps reduce violence rates against women. The concept of toxic masculinity can often align manhood with violence and aggression, and this study showed that by actively educating males on healthy coping mechanisms for anger, their violence rates against women drastically decrease (Cerdán-Torregrosa, 2025). Similar to this intervention, teaching lessons in school about emotional expression and vulnerability help adolescents unlearn toxic masculinities and understand how to channel their emotions in a positive way (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021). Spaces where males can have discussions about their feelings and experiences with masculinities make it easier to be vulnerable and express their masculinity in healthier ways than what is generally portrayed in society (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2021).

Unique interventions that have been successful in reducing risk-taking behavior in adolescents by de-influencing negative masculinities include narrative writing and story-telling. Creating a safe space for sharing personal experiences with peers allows reflection to be at the forefront of learning (Peretz & Lehrer, 2019). Hearing other personal accounts of toxic

masculinity helps men reflect on their experiences and learn how to share their stories, in turn challenging stereotypes and learning from each other (Schermer, 2013). This strategy can be implemented in a variety, including in small groups and in classroom settings. The flexibility of this solution provides a foundation for major success with encouraging positive masculinities and altering how society views manhood. Narrative writing helps individuals explore their identities and process emotions, while also teaching them to be honest and vulnerable (Schermer, 2013). These skills are vital to rewriting gender norms and expectations for masculinity, and offer a great starting point for discussions surrounding the impacts of negative masculinity.

Conclusion

Previous research may be effective in informing future action in the Edinburgh community. Drawing on research from Cerdán-Torregrosa and Pérez-Martínez et al., Fast Forward could potentially implement educational workshops for men and boys that teach about the importance of emotional vulnerability and healthy anger management strategies. It may be beneficial to collaborate with local schools in order to reach a wider audience of young boys. Training staff members and volunteers to educate young boys on these topics will also be useful. It may also be beneficial to incorporate similar workshops into the Ask Dad program so that fathers of young boys are able to model emotionally healthy behaviors to their sons. Teaching fathers anger management skills and practicing emotionally vulnerable exercises with them will allow their sons to learn these emotional skills through social learning.

In terms of specific activities, narrative writing interventions can be a valuable tool in encouraging healthier masculinities. It may be difficult for young men to share their own expressive writing, as it is a very vulnerable thing to do. Therefore, it will be beneficial to also incorporate adult models into this intervention so that the young men are more inclined to

participate in the activity after seeing older men do so. The writing prompts can involve personal stories about masculinity, challenges, or transformation, as well as reflection on men's upbringing, role models, and current gender expectations. This can encourage young men to use writing as a tool for processing and reshaping their current masculine identities.

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