

How Do We Define Toxic Masculinity

by Darcie Kim

When we have conversations about sexual assault, they often center around the victims or the circumstances surrounding the assault. Alcohol, drugs, revealing clothing, flirtatious behavior, and regret are frequently held responsible for setting the precedent for sexual assault. But, a culprit that we too often hesitate to name consists of harmful societal expectations of masculinity.

There's often an assumption that toxic masculinity is an attack on inherent masculinity, and the misapplication of this term has unfortunately led to the popular misperception that toxic masculinity is the belief that all ideas and associations surrounding manhood are toxic.

"I thought that toxic masculinity was just a term feminists used to

exaggerate the negative qualities of guys," said a male student.

However, the point of the term toxic masculinity is to draw attention to the narrow stereotypes that surround males, and how these stereotypes are further encouraged by the "boys will be boys" mentality and ultimately allow for misogyny.

Boys don't need to be strong. Boys don't need to hide emotion. Boys don't need to hook up with numerous girls to prove their masculinity. Boys don't need to objectify girls to impress their friends.

Some students participate in this culture of toxic masculinity. Another male student said that, "Toxic masculinity definitely exists here because sex is glorified. I hear guys talking about hook-ups and the objectification of girls all the time."

Senior Eli Friedman said, "Toxic masculinity manifests in men who compete with each other to impress

women, and at times put down other men who are into something not considered 'masculine' by the culture. There is a desire for domination with toxic masculinity. This could definitely result in sexual abuse, which is often carried out for power rather than sexual gratification."

What we should take from toxic masculinity is that men need to refuse the "boys will be boys" attitude and hold other men accountable for misogynistic mentalities and behaviors.

If a guy is aggressively coming on to or flirting with someone at a party, we shouldn't excuse this by saying that because boys are inherently aggressive creatures, their actions are understandable. If a guy sexually assaults someone wearing revealing clothes, we shouldn't excuse that by saying guys are overtly sexual creatures who are naturally attracted to people dressed sexily.

A 2011 study by The Journal of Adolescent Health titled, "Time-Varying Risk Factors and Sexual Aggression Perpetration Among Male College Students," followed more than 700 men through four years of college.

The research found that while alcohol use was always higher among men who committed more sexual assaults, the trend in assault itself wasn't directly caused by alcohol use.

For men who committed more sexual assault and men who committed less sexual assaults, they reported drinking less by their senior year in college. But the men who committed fewer assaults also reported "falling rates of impulsivity, hostility toward women, and beliefs that supported rape. The men whose rates of assault were going up, in contrast, reported a growing sense of peer support for forced sex, peer pressure, pornog-

raphy use, and hostility toward women," according to FiveThirtyEight.

Thus, cultural expectations and social accepted attitudes about women and power are what ultimately contribute to sexual assault.

"There is a certain power dynamic created by the pervasiveness of toxic masculinity that allows for men to believe that women fundamentally owe them something, and that can be a huge factor behind sexual assault. Toxic masculinity can sometimes warp how men, especially among groups of other men, perceive such violence," said senior Will Thornton.

While there are many underlying factors that contribute to issues between men and women, societal expectations of masculinity and femininity could be at the root of a lot of our problems. Changing these perceived normalities will take time, but there is hope.

"Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It's the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly "feminine" traits—which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual—are the means by which your status as "man" can be taken away" (tolerance.org)



Ho1' up, Ho1' up, We Dem Boyz

by Ezra Wallach

For the entirety of our childhood, we boys have subconsciously been taught that masculinity consisted of strength, toughness, apathy, and confidence among other things. In the past few years though, the concept of toxic masculinity has been tossed around, attempting to shine light on unrealistic expectations that both boys and girls place on boys to act tough and strong.

This movement has tried to encourage boys to seek help with mental health problems, to pursue interests outside of gender norms, to not resort to violence, and possibly most importantly, to stand up for women and women's rights, too.

But, the complication lies in the fact that some of these less "masculine" actions, such as crying in public or supporting women, will still be judged by certain communities, families and groups to stray away from what traditional masculinity looks like, and would essentially lean to the side of femininity, which is "weakness"—this somewhat untrue truth is what often causes men to act tough even when they don't really want to.

But, if someone doesn't act traditionally masculine, it doesn't mean they are feminine, and it doesn't even mean that they can't really be masculine too.

In fact, the less masculine op-

tion would arguably be to conform to these gender norms and be a man even when you don't feel like one. The choice that requires real bravery and strength is the one that lets men be comfortable in themselves and can likely help out women in the process, even if it means sacrificing what many believe it means to be a man.

My idea to write this was sparked by a TED talk I saw a year or so ago by Justin Baldoni. He says this to the audience: "I challenge you to see if you can use the same qualities that you feel make you a man to go deeper into yourself. Your strength, your bravery, your toughness: Can we redefine what those mean and use them to explore our hearts? Are you brave enough to be vulnerable? To reach out to another man when you need help? To dive headfirst into your shame? Are you strong enough to be sensitive, to cry whether you are hurting or you're happy, even if it makes you look weak?"

Strength comes from going against what others tell you that you are supposed to do, even if it entails some sort of sacrifice. The question should not be whether you are man enough to work out at Lifetime every single day, or if you are man enough to deal with all of your mental health problems on your own, the question should be whether or not you are man enough to admit that you aren't traditionally masculine at all.

When I heard this line of think-

ing for the first time, it changed my perspective on everything that I thought would make me seem like a man—I even made my New Year's resolution this year to cry more.

Even though I knew that standing up for women or letting my emotions fly free was likely the right thing to do, I never considered it to be manly. But, it just makes so much sense.

He goes on to say this too: "Are you confident enough to listen to the women in your life? To hear their ideas and their solutions? To hold their anguish and actually believe them, even if what they're saying is against you? And will you be man enough to stand up to other men when you hear "locker room talk," when you hear stories of sexual harassment? When you hear your boys talking about grabbing a-- or getting her drunk, will you actually stand up and do something so that one day we don't have to live in a world where a woman has to risk everything and come forward to say the words 'me too?'"

The more we make these terrible actions towards women seem cowardly or unmanly, the less likely the bro-culture is to accept them, starting in high school.

None of this is to say that by getting rid ourselves of toxic masculinity, we will rid of sexual misconduct or sexism altogether—it's much more complicated than just that. But,

by encouraging real discussion on what it means to be a man, we can deter men from doing these acts, and encourage more of them to stand up against those who do so.

Competitions with friends on who can hook up with the hottest girl might seem harmless and fun, but the essential need for power that some guys feel within their communities or groups contributes to pain that women feel by being objectified or harassed at the same time, too.

The fear of what it means to do the right thing in the context of still being manly, is what often stops us from doing it. But, what if we choose to realize and understand that to stand up and go against these outdated norms is really where our masculinity should come from? Now, this should be scary, and this will be harder. This requires more strength.

I can't say I am perfect on this issue. I have definitely said or done some things to fit in or to seem like a man, but this fact shouldn't disqualify me or anyone from getting better in the future. At times, I have found superficial strength in acting like a man even when I didn't feel like one, and even some weakness in not acting in the way I knew was right. Sometimes, I simply didn't have enough strength to seem feminine.

Remember, the culture has taught boys to be this way, and it will likely take a long time to reverse these ideas. So, we should be patient.

We should hold men accountable for their actions but understand that for some, what they know is being uprooted, and what they thought was the "manly" thing to do is no longer accepted by society.

This will not be easy, and it will require a major cultural change to have these new ideas about masculinity impact everyone, but that isn't the point.

By knowing that standing up to bad guys or crying during movies (because hiding emotions usually makes them worse) is the right thing to do for yourself, and that it requires *masculine* strength, hopefully more men will feel compelled to change for the better.

Find strength in being vulnerable. Find strength in being a feminist. Find strength in going to a therapist. Find strength in choosing to be openly gay. Find strength in wearing the clothes you want to wear. Or, choose to find strength in doing exactly what every other guy is doing, which will sacrifice your individuality, and likely hurt yourself along with the women in your life by doing so.

Stand up for what is right for others and for yourself and the rest will fall into place. But, no matter what, we boys should never be worrying about whether or not we are being a man when we do so.