



shalem Digest

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TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

What's Going On With Men Today?

BY MARK VANDER VENNEN

For the last couple of years, in conversations with men, I have found occasion to say, "I think men are in trouble today." To my amazement, every man I have trotted out this statement to has immediately agreed.

Without reservation, each man has connected with this observation. No one has looked quizzical or puzzled, or asked me what I mean.

What is going on here? What is happening with men today?

My purpose in asking this question is to start a conversation, to begin a dialogue. I want to stimulate an exchange together about the emotional lives of men. I hope that you as readers—both men and women—will join in this exchange and bring to it your own perspectives and experiences.

There are all kinds of men, just as there are all kinds of boys. Like women, they display a huge range of interests and predilections that cannot be easily categorized. In my own life, I am grateful for emotionally healthy men, especially men older than me (some now gone), who have generously mentored me. I am grateful for the friendship and support of gay friends. I am also grateful for the deep impact of important women in my life. I hope that all of us are blessed with this kind of rich mosaic of men and women in our lives.

So why then am I writing about men? Because I do believe that men are in trouble today.

Take just two examples. We are all immersed in news stories about alleged male sexual

violence by public figures, such as Jian Ghomeshi, Bill Cosby and two federal Members of Parliament, not to mention the unconscionable misogynist comments made on Facebook by male Dalhousie University dental students about their female colleagues.

I know that the vast majority of men, myself included, find such actions abhorrent. But beyond that, how else do we as men respond? I think that a common response is confusion and—dare I say—perhaps even some

embarrassment. Strange as it may sound, we may feel somehow implicated simply because we are men. How do we as men negotiate that?

Then consider a deeply alarming statistic: men are four times more likely than women to commit suicide, and the group at the highest risk of suicide is white men over the age of 65 (their suicide rate is eight times higher than women in that age bracket). How do we understand the deep, profound despair lying underneath such tragic figures?

MEN AND VULNERABILITY

I believe that there are constructive, positive ways forward for men. But before we explore them, let's try to survey something of the landscape of men's interior lives. ▶



The Shalem Challenge: Men Getting Together

If this article strikes a chord for you as a man, here is one possible action you could take.

Pull together four other men. They may be members of your church, your workplace, your Rotary Club, your hockey team. Agree that you will meet five times. Make sure that where you meet is private enough that some sensitive material can be shared safely.

Focus your meetings on just one of you at a time, until all five men have been covered. Each session will consist of one person answering the following questions, drawn from Shalem's Restorative Practice work. Make sure that each person speaks to each question and has enough time to answer thoroughly:

- 1) What's been happening for you as a man these days?
- 2) Who is affected by you working through what it is to be a man? In what ways?
- 3) What is the hardest thing for you about being a man today?
- 4) What do you think are the main issues?
- 5) What will be your next step(s) in moving forward positively as a man?

Then, if you wish, share the outcomes of your conversations with me at Shalem (markvv@shalemnetwork.org). My commitment is to compile them—giving no identifying information of any kind—and make them available. Your collective wisdom of men's experiences can then benefit an emerging community of men.

As a group of men, you may be surprised at how thoroughly enjoyable this experience is!

► So much about male and female experience is common. After all, all of us are human beings with the same need to attach to parent figures and to significant others. We are all fundamentally relational creatures. We are wired by our Creator to connect, to belong. Neurobiologists are clear that relationship is as essential to life as oxygen, water and food. This is equally true for men and women throughout the trajectories of our lives.

Some of where male and female experience differs has to do with culture, especially with the culturally defined gender roles, norms and expectations that boys and girls are raised in. These role expectations can prove to be obstacles to our development.

When it comes to boys and men, we live in a culture that tends to not want men to be vulnerable. We seem to work hard to separate boys and men from their feelings. The message is that "being a man" involves standing up to discomfort and pain. "Giving in" to internal distress, or "being emotional", is weakness, not "manly". A Grade Five teacher once said to me that restorative practice would never work in her classroom because "boys don't get emotions". Every boy I have met is fully capable of "getting" emotions—and "getting" them well. But I am sure that the boys in her class learned quickly that it is not safe to express vulnerability in her classroom.

Building A Community Of Men

Consider one story about seeking to build a community of men. I have belonged to a men's group for the past 25 years. When each of our boys turned 13, the father gathered a group of men that he trusted and set up a campfire evening where they met with his son—without the father present or privy to the conversation. We talked about what it was like to turn 13, what being a teenage boy was like for us, where we messed up, what we learned. And we blessed him. The father was telling his son, "this is a community of men that



Psychiatrist and family therapist Frank Pittman has argued that our culture promotes an heroic "male mystique" which, to be attained, requires that men deny and reject the "weakness" of their vulnerability. In his book *Man Enough: Fathers, Sons and the Search for Masculinity*, Pittman claims that to be "man enough", to achieve this mystique, men tend to fall into one of four patterns, three of which are negative. He describes *controlling* men, who must dominate and control their spouses, children and environments in order to be what they understand to be "man enough"; *competitive* men, who must compete with and come out on top of all other men to be "man enough"; and *philandering* men, who, to be "man enough", must conquer any number of women.

But then he describes a fourth pattern: *partnering* men. These men have learned to partner with their spouses, their children, their co-workers, their community, to love and genuinely serve others, to stand up for justice and to bless life. But for men to learn how to be partners, they require the active involvement and blessing of other men, especially men older than them, to help model the way.

THE MISSING COMMUNITY OF MEN

And there, for me, is the rub. It's why many men experience themselves to be in trouble today. The degree to which we as men are

I endorse. You have my blessing to access them directly from here on in and to speak freely." The relationships that developed there continue to this day—small communities of men for each of our sons.

What would happen if fathers on a broad scale started to develop this practice for their sons? What would be the impact?

emotionally isolated from each other today is extraordinary. There are very few spaces, venues or platforms where it is acceptable for men to meet and share their vulnerabilities with each other. As a culture we even seem to be frightened by such a prospect; it seems to be a cultural taboo. But never, in my view, has it been more important for men to find ways of coming together in emotionally meaningful ways.

I often talk about the "missing community of men". Men are intensely hungry for the company of healthy men. They have a need to attach to other men. In this they are not unique; I believe that the same need manifests itself in the desire of women to attach to other women—a desire that so many women fulfill admirably. Mark Twain once said that at the age of 12 a boy starts to imitate any older man who pays attention to him, and then he simply continues to do so for the rest of his life. I think he's right, except that it starts much earlier. But in the absence of living communities of men where men share their vulnerabilities with each other, many tend to turn to women to get certain needs met that only other men can adequately meet.

The large majority of men, in my experience, want to be real partners. But in today's world there are very few opportunities for men to

gather together and have real conversations about their emotional lives and their struggles to be healthy, life-affirming, life-giving men. It's time for all of us to start a conversation about what's happening with men today. And it's time for men to develop new ways of gathering together in order to have that conversation among themselves. For one practical suggestion to get this going, see "The Shalem Challenge: Getting Men Together". And for one small experiment see "Building a Community of Men".

May God bless us as together, both men and women, we seek to explore the meaning of being wholehearted human beings in this world. Thank God for gift of women and men. And thank God for the many men who know the meaning of sacrifice, who serve as remarkable partners with all of God's creatures on the journey of life! ◀

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Raising Boys And Girls

A good friend has organized service trips overseas for teens for the past 20 years. He tells me that 15 years ago he could hardly recruit teen girls. They were anxious. Now his trips are filled with girls but he has real trouble recruiting teen boys. They are anxious.

A kindergarten teacher tells me that over the years there has been a shift in how kindergarten girls and boys enter school. Today the message to girls is: "life is tough, but you are strong, you are beautiful, you can pick yourself back up, you go girl!" The boys, on the other hand, come coddled, highly protected, without much expected of them.

I celebrate how we are raising girls today. But I worry about how we are raising boys.

Check out Michael Ungar's book *Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*. Parenting is difficult and I do not judge parents; they need support. Parents who tend to "hover" or "helicopter" genuinely want what is best for their child. Ungar, who is a partner in resilience research with us at Shalem, makes the point that kids need to experience risk and to learn how to fail; if we deprive them of these then they miss out on a fundamental developmental step. This applies equally to boys and girls. Also check out Shalem therapist Michelle De Boer's article "Parenting to Prepare" (*Digest*, Fall, 2011, available for download at the Shalem website).



Seeking Out Support

It takes enormous courage for a man to reach out for help, especially to other men. In many ways reaching out is counter-cultural. Thankfully, however, more and more men are doing so.

If you are struggling with depression, or carrying secret shame, please do seek out support. Reach out to a credible man in your network. Or call a local therapist, male or female, and give counselling a try. If you are a member of a CAP church, call 1.866.347.0041 to receive anonymous, free counselling support from a local counsellor. At Shalem, our restorative practice work in churches, schools and workplaces creates safe spaces for people to work through and move beyond the relational damage they experience as a result of conflict and harm. Don't hesitate to contact our office to find out more.

Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Dear Friends of Shalem,

The Board of the Shalem Mental Health Network has prayerfully approved a new three-year Strategic Plan for Shalem, and I would love to tell you about it. The plan is called *Impact and Influence: 2015-2017*. Using it as our guide, and with God's blessing, we will seek to deepen our *impact* with the people we are privileged to walk alongside, even as we are impacted by them; and to exercise *influence* in the world mental health service delivery. Through it all, we seek to live up to Shalem's aim to restore hope in the name of the Gospel.

THREE DIRECTIONS

The plan features three key future directions. Executive Director-led Working Groups, consisting of various Board members, staff members and Shalem supporters, are now working on each of the three directions. Let me explain them briefly.

Engagement: Shalem is all about partnership. How can we deepen and expand our engagement with current and future partners, including members and supporters,

communities, faith communities, workplaces, schools, and many professional mental health people? How can our language be more inviting, as we seek to be "missional" in the field of mental health?

Future Service Directions/Shalem Centre of Excellence and Learning in Community-Based Mental Health: Everything that Shalem is doing is an experiment in creating a new, different relationship between communities and the professional mental health sector. That is our niche in the mental health world; it's our calling card. Shalem is a laboratory for such experimentation, and in relatively short order it has been yielding very strong results, some of which have already been published in peer-reviewed professional journals. We have learned enough now to more seriously evaluate, to do research, to interpret the results and to disseminate them in creative ways, as we seek to explore more deeply what it is to be human. That's the vision of the new (virtual) Shalem Centre of Excellence and Learning in Community-Based Mental Health that we will establish by 2017. It will serve as a platform for learning, improved practice and influence in the mental health world. It will also be the vehicle through which we seek to stay alert to new needs as they emerge. This is an exciting development!

Fully Implementing Shalem's Business Model: The recent establishment of the legally incorporated, charitable, independently governed Shalem Mental Health Foundation brings us one step closer to long-term financial sustainability. The Foundation is governed by

a separate Board of Directors. With the support of Christian Stewardship Services, the Foundation will develop and implement a comprehensive development plan. Watch for more details as these plans develop!

At the same time, at the Network, we will undertake a deliberate review of the revenue streams within each program, with a view to strengthening them. That will include a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of each one. What is SROI? Take, for example, our WrapAround program. It is not uncommon that a family's involvement in WrapAround prevents a child in that family from entering the long-term care of the Children's Aid Society. An SROI analysis calculates the costs that this saves government and society by, for example, multiplying the number of days in care prevented times the cost per day of foster care, and then comparing that to the cost of Shalem's WrapAround program. These analyses, we expect, will be compelling and will position us well for the newest trend on the horizon: funding opportunities based on the ability to demonstrate the Social Return on Investment of specific programs.

GRATITUDE

Shalem's budget is balanced, we are debt-free, and that remains our firm commitment. This is an extraordinary testimony to the partnership and sacrificial giving of so many of you—and to God's faithful provision of our daily bread. We would not be in this place without your generous support, and our need for it is critical: please do continue to give. Your support in prayers, gifts and time enables all of us to extend a real cup of cold water in the name of Christ to our neighbours—to have an impact, even as they have an impact on us. Thank God for the gift of *relationship*. And may God bless you in your environments, as you walk alongside people who are vulnerable, and there encounter the God of living hope and the extraordinary courage of people.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Mark", written in a cursive style.

