The Real Life Experiences of Men and their Holistic Health

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**Introduction**

The content of this paper draws on the 14 years practice evidence of Men’s Action Network’s (MAN) service delivery, and outlines some of our experiences and the challenges that these present for those engaged in work with men. We have to state at the outset, however, that lack of adequate resources has meant that we are unable to apply the strict scientific rigour we would have liked to our findings. We do not present this work as a definitive scientific template for work with men. Indeed, some of what we highlight may be stating the obvious. However, we offer it in this fashion, with the belief it can inform those engaged in, or wishing to engage in, work with men.

**The Context and Work of MAN**

MAN began in 1994 as a community response to the death of a young man who was seeking help to deal with his traumatic childhood experiences. It was the experience of the small group of friends who were around him at that time that they couldn’t find a male-specific service to adequately help him. As a result of his untimely and sad death by suicide, these men became determined to try to create such a service. From their efforts, MAN was born.

Meeting once a week, they decided to publicise and keep open a “safe space” where they could hear from any man who was looking to find support. The safe space they formed became the bedrock of MAN’s service delivery and, now named “Your Space”, has continued to remain open to men on a regular weekly basis ever since.

In 1996, MAN constituted as a charity with the mission of: “Supporting and promoting male health and well-being”. Since then, we have developed a number of community responses to meet the needs of the men we have encountered. Currently, MAN’s responses take the form of a telephone helpline, one-to-one support and/or counselling, facilitated self-help support groups, health programmes, residential, community projects, outreach programmes and advocacy work.

**Community Development Model**

Our ethos is to create safe spaces to allow us to hear and support men’s life experiences. As such, we closely follow a community development process which involves listening, understanding and responding to the specific needs of the men we encounter.

Over our lifespan, we estimate we have heard, supported and been privileged to be part of the life experiences of well over 3,000 men and boys. From this, we draw our evidence base and present some of our key learning and challenges.
Changing Thinking
Fundamentally, MAN believes that work with men is, primarily, about trying to change men’s thinking with regard to their present life choices. This is the precursor to a healthier lifestyle. However, our major challenge is penned in the words of this seminar’s “Nowhere Man” lyrics: “He’s as blind as he can be, just sees what he wants to see, nowhere man can you see me at all?” It is often our experience when trying to work with men that it’s hard to know what to do to be seen by the very men you are trying to reach.

Many organisations struggle to address varied and complex health and lifestyle factors which look at why, for instance, men die younger or from suicide at an alarming rate - just two of a myriad of issues which have serious consequences for men’s lives. We have found that stereotypical thinking is still very much ingrained within men, and is still the major obstacle to addressing men’s health issues - adding to the challenges and frustrations of those trying to make a difference in men’s lives.

Steve Biddulph\(^1\) gives us a stark overview of some of the areas in which we are attempting to change men’s thinking and lifestyles when he writes: “The lack of help to grow into a man, and the resulting, desperate, ‘I’m fine’ façade by men, has disastrous consequences, and men are a mess. The terrible effects on our marriages, fathering abilities, and our health and leadership skills are a matter of public record. Our marriages fail, our kids hate us, we die from stress, and on the way we destroy the world”. This task may be huge, but we need to begin somewhere.

Challenging the Myths
In our experience, some of the most destructive consequences we have witnessed of unhealthy thinking are associated with two of the major myths that men still believe and live out in their lives. These are: “As a man, I feel I can’t talk about it” and “as a man I shouldn’t / don’t / can’t need to seek help”. When believed in tandem, these often have the severest consequences on men’s ability to cope in crisis or to seek medical help before a condition escalates beyond treatable help.

We’ve found that the “I can’t talk about it” myth is often accompanied by other strong gendered stereotypical thinking, such as: “I am supposed to be big and strong”, “I am supposed to get on with it”, “my feelings only get in the way” or “emotions are something I don’t have the ability (emotional language) to express”.

Men often tell us: “As a man I should be able to deal / cope with it and, if I can’t, I’m a failure” or “as a man, I am the provider - my needs are not as important or important at all”. Men also tell us they often feel that if they just put whatever the situation or crisis is out of their mind, or focus on work, it will go away or sort itself out.

MAN has been able to successfully challenge these myths with men who find - often to their surprise - that they are very able to talk openly and at a deep emotional level about every aspect of their lives. We have assisted men to feel at ease talking, and helped them to come to realise that talking, and asking for help, is not a weakness but a basic human need and, indeed, is a ‘strength choice’.

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MAN feels that if you can challenge and provide healthier alternatives to the myths that men can’t talk or men won’t ask for help, then you can have a positive major impact on the lifestyle of men. So what do we need to do to challenge these myths and to help men come to this realisation? … Put simply, we need to provide, a ‘safe space’ for it to happen in.

Safe Spaces
Work with men challenges all of us to provide a safe environment where men will interact with us. Wherever, and however, we come into contact with men, our aim should be to create a positive environment of safety, where men and boys feel at ease and able to engage in whatever process is on offer. The safe space offers the opportunity to challenge and change thinking and behaviour.

Wherever we work, and whatever our reasons for wanting to work with men, MAN believes there are some common factors which help to create such a safe space. These include …

- Ensuring that the physical environment in which the interaction takes place is welcoming, comfortable and male-friendly.
- The helper / worker having an adequate grounding in awareness of how men think / act / are, and the life / health / societal issues that they face.
- The requirement for self-awareness of how work with men makes you feel, any gendered perceptions you may have of yourself as a worker working with men, or attitudes towards men in general. There should be no conflict between the needs of the men you wish to work with and your own agenda(s).
- The ability to offer confidentiality, empathy, trust, a non-judgemental approach and, often, lots of time to assist men to find an emotional language which will help you to support them.

Remember, also, that these men may not always sit up straight, talk in quiet or refined tones, never break wind, pick or scratch parts of their anatomy or always be aware of what you’re trying to do for them first time around! Men have, however, often voiced to us that they feel those seeking to help them place these expectations upon them. If applied, these actions can help to create the basis for a safe space where you can hear, and assist, men to talk to you about their lives, challenge myths and thinking, and begin to offer healthier alternatives.

Alternatives
No matter what ‘healthy alternative’ you feel you have to offer, once you create the space, then your challenge is to make it evident that your alternative is a real option which will work for them. For MAN, the main focus of our work has been to show men that the alternatives of talking and accepting help are ones that can have major benefits for their life.

Men aged from 18 to 80 years have told us: “We could / would never talk in-depth about what we’re really thinking and feeling”. However, after offering the space, and using the skills required, men often, surprisingly, find themselves quite able to talk freely and openly. They
discover, by experience, that the alternative is not only possible, but is both real and beneficial. In the same way, again by experience, men also come to realise that allowing someone to help is OK, and men tell us that they are much more likely to seek help again when needed. It is vitally important, however, that men get the right help when they need it - because if you can give the right help, in the right way, you have the capacity to make a long-lasting positive health change to men’s health and well-being.

So, what do we mean by the ‘right help’? To build upon what we have already outlined, here are some other ways we have found which often help.

**What Works with Men?**

Much of why men are more likely to engage with you is dependent on how you treat them. We offer this excerpt from MAN’s anger awareness programme as an illustration of how it might be. Lindenfield argues that when people feel angry, this stems from the feeling of an unmet basic love, which leads to feelings of rejection. These feelings are painful and, out of fear, they become defensive - which is seen as anger. Anytime we feel we are treated, or perceive we are treated, in a “less than loving way” (e.g. dismissed, disowned, belittled demeaned, treated disloyally or with indifference, uncared for … in essence, experience or perceive any form of physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, neglectful or social abuse), we get angry.

A large part of MAN’s work is dealing with the experiences of how and why men are angry, and the impact that this has on their life and the lives of the people they touch. It is clear to us, that being treated by others with respect, dignity, compassion and non-judgementally is a form of mutual love which often goes to the heart of how all of us feel we have a right to be treated. This does, however, offer the challenge that we are also expected to treat others this way. We have found that men respond very positively when treated in this ‘loving way’. This values the men we encounter, and adds to their integrity and their own self-value.

**Valuing and Validating Men and the Work**

It is extremely important that we value the men and the work we do because, in our experience, men are often incredibly bad at valuing and validating themselves. In a society where men are often unsure of their role in life, it is vitally important that those who work with them have a sense of this, and how important self-value is to men’s esteem and development, and to their ability to seek help. We have found that if you can’t value and validate the men you meet and this work, there is little acceptance of you or credibility for the work you do.

**Strength Messages**

In our experience, men identify with and value strength choices and being strong. Often men have great difficulty asking for or accepting help because, as stated already, they tend to see asking for help as weakness or a failure on their part. We know, from our work, the personal energies and recourses involved when you choose to accept help or engage in any process of change, and we continually impress on men the ‘strength choice’ of taking this decision and making the commitment to it. We find men identify with these strength messages, and they
say it makes them much more open to seeking and accepting help again. This is crucially important - particularly at times when men might be in serious difficulties or crisis, and when you may only have one final chance to get this message across.

**Suicide - Final Chance**

Some of MAN's most difficult work is in the area of suicide prevention. Part of the work of ensuring men's safety involves checking what personal support structures men have (or are aware of), and which they could / would use when feeling suicidal - particularly after they move on from us.

We have often found that men are well able to identify family, friends, even organisations that they know of, who would help. However, when you then ask the question "which one of them will you use / contact", you often get back a blank stare or a silence. This brings it home to you that men's inability to ask for help, because of how they view it, can have fatal effects upon their life. That said, we have found that by highlighting the strengths of accepting support, men can identify with this and, in our experience, are more accepting of our help and help from others.

**Men are Uniquely Different**

There is one important element, however, which has a bearing on this work, and which often causes difficulties for those looking to replicate work elsewhere. Everyone thinks, feels and behaves just that little bit differently because of the uniqueness of their family life, where they were brought up, where (or if) they work, their personal, social and community life experiences etc. While all of us experience some degree of commonality, we all struggle with our world in our own unique way. Every response, therefore, has to be uniquely tailored to each man's individual needs, and it's often not always possible to just implement existing models elsewhere. We know, from our experience, that one model or response definitely doesn't always fit a new set of circumstances.

**Person-Centred Work**

So, from our experience, there are no real shortcuts when working with men. The work has to be very person-centred and, often, very worker-intensive to effect lasting change. We have found no real substitute to taking time to make friends with men, building trust with them, and allowing the interactions to be guided at the pace of the man or men engaged in the process. Men welcome and respond to this personal approach and, indeed, this can often be as simple as a personal letter - as we found with men invited to take part in "Health MOT" sessions. When we asked why they had accepted an invite to this event, most men said that it was because their doctor had sent them a personal invitation - which they felt showed genuine concern for their health and well-being.
Looking for a Quick Fix
While the work is personal and can be time consuming, we have also found, time and again, that men often just want a quick fix option when it comes to help. Sometimes, as soon as men feel they have got an insight into a way forward with whatever issues they are dealing with, they go off, never to acknowledge they have been with you. As an organisation, we recognise, respect and accept this as a fact of working with men. However, we know from feedback from other parties, or when men return again, that they value the space, time and help. For us, this has meant that we often have to use our skill base in a very intensive and time-limited manner - as we try to do the best we can for men in the short time we may have access to them.

How and where do we come into Contact with Men?
Through the creation and publicising of our services, men have sought us out. However, still almost three quarters of the men who use our services come via referrals from other bodies. Often, close family members (in particular the partners of men - who we know are the gatekeepers of men’s health), are the motivators for men to come to us.

We realised very early on in our existence that if you wish to make a difference to men’s lives you can’t wait for them to come or be sent to you. You often have to go to where men are. To do this, we inaugurated events like Men’s Health Week and events celebrating Father’s Day; took our outreach programmes into prison, schools, youth and community groups; and organised residential progammes. All of these allowed us to hear and support men’s and boys’ life experiences.

We believe that the practice evidence and experience gained through this access has given us some understanding. We hope to pass this on in this final section, and to offer what MAN sees as some of the challenges facing other service providers.

Challenges for Service Providers
As well as a growing recognition of the need for work with men, there has also been development of obligations upon statutory service providers to gender screen their work and address areas where men are missing. Hereafter, we offer what MAN sees as some of the challenges facing service providers ...

1. Listen
Currently, there is a lot of searching for best practice in the field of working with men. While limited examples exist in Northern Ireland, we know, from our own experience, that what is often best practice for one group of men, may not be so for another. There are no shortcuts to this work and, if you wish to do meaningful work, then you need to put adequate resources in place to help to build upon the work already there. In a community development model, this involves taking the time to really LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN, and to hear and respond to what men want. Really listening to what men want involves investing a lot of time, effort, and resources.
2. Resource Implications
Doing this work effectively can be personally and financially demanding. It is our sense that for many organisations / service providers, working to tight budgets, there is a conflict between the awareness of wanting / needing to do the work and having the resources to adequately do it. This often means that it’s easier not to attempt it or that it gets done in a piecemeal manner. The challenge for all service providers is to see the longer-term benefits of actively seeking out and engaging men, and to build this work into their organisation’s strategies, policies and budget from the outset.

3. The Nature of the Engagement
The challenge for those wishing to engage in this work is to develop their own little safe spaces, where they can create their own best practice model of working with men, in their own particular field. It will mean finding unique and innovative ways of taking your message or service to men, but it will add to the growing awareness and possibilities of how it can be done.

4. Awareness of the Gender Dimensions of the Work
Again, it may seem obvious to state, but for those wishing, or tasked, to engage in work with men, the challenge is to at least have a sound awareness of the key issues in and gender dimensions of the work. The challenge is to value the men you engage with and to treat them in the ‘loving way’ outlined earlier. For service providers, there is a need to have specific individuals - preferably men - employed in positions where they are tasked with actively and genuinely engaging men.

5. Men’s Health versus Women’s Health
We know that women are often the gatekeepers of men’s health. Men have told us how they have been ‘coerced’ into coming to us, or into seeking medical help, because of the concern of a partner, mother or daughter. While a lot has been done in recent years to try to address the inequalities which impact upon women’s health, there is still much which remains to be done in this area. As the need for work with men continues to be recognised and/or required, resources will have to be found somewhere. That ‘somewhere’, we fear, could be from the women’s sector. Clearly men’s and women’s health should be complementary and not in conflict with each other. We need to aim for a future which is mutually beneficial for us all. The major challenge to those who provide resources is that they need to avoid setting-up a situation or environment of competition and conflict which becomes ultimately detrimental to both men’s and women’s health.

6. Policies and Strategies
Finally, new guidelines will, hopefully, make us all more aware of our responsibilities to engage with men who are missing from our services. The Gender Equality Strategy from OFMDFM highlights gender as one of the target areas to be addressed under Section 75. MAN suggests taking this a step further, and sees that fundamentally we are, or identify as, either male or female. After this, we are also single, married, a child, a parent, disabled, of ethnic origin, gay, bisexual, lesbian, employed, homeless, of a certain religious or political belief … We feel that it is important for service providers to look, in the first instance, for the gaps where males or females are missing out, and we see gender mainstreaming of policies (such as in the model below) as a template which will help to address this.
Example of how to Mainstream a Policy

Step One: Outline the current position of men and women in the area which your expenditure activity will address.
   - Who are the current beneficiaries of your area of expenditure activity?
   - How many are men / women are beneficiaries?
   - What data sources do you use to determine these figures?

Step Two: What factors lead to women and men being affected differentially in the area being addressed by your expenditure activity?
   - Identify the factors which lead to the differential impact on women and men.

Step Three: How can the factors which lead to women or men being affected differentially be addressed and changed?
   - How can the policy proposal / measure respond to the factors identified in Step 2?
   - Where considered appropriate, what actions do you propose in this regard?

The Equal Opportunities Promotion and Monitoring Unit

In Conclusion
In our experience, men’s work is not only crucial for the future health and well-being of men themselves, but for the lives, communities and societies they touch. If men are missing from our work, then the challenge - dare I say the duty - is for us to see and acknowledge it, educate ourselves, and then resource the safe spaces to hear and respond to what is happening in or missing from men’s lives.

I will leave the last words to a man who took twenty years to write his reflection of his own life and that of the men he knew and observed. He presents it deliberately in the shape of the mushroom cloud which follows a nuclear explosion, to signify how, like Biddulph, he feels men today seem to be destroying their lives and the lives of those they touch in apocalyptic proportions …
Because all too often
Man’s work is more important than who he is
And what he earns becomes what he is worth
And his career is more important than his family
And when he is sacked or retired he becomes useless
And he must always pretend to be on top and push others down
And has to be strong and responsible and not to care about hurts
And never cry or show any vulnerability, in order not to be picked on
And the only way to escape from being a victim is to become a bully
And our confusion between sex and closeness isolates us from each other
And alienates us from women
And we must go to war or be branded a coward
And must kill or be killed
And torture and destroy and exploit and oppress
And obey orders and comply and compete for approval
And learn to use sex as a symbol of our strength
And perform, even in our most intimate relationships
And, if gay, be fair game for ridicule, contempt, hatred and violence
And use women as objects to prove our manhood
And shout at children to feel powerful
And terrify others to deny our own fears
And we struggle to support our families
And are cheated of the fruits of our labour
And spend most of our time away from the ones we love
And get ulcers and high blood pressure
And die of heart attacks or stress-related diseases
Because, for all these reasons
And many more you care to add
Dear friends, I think it is time
Before it is too late
That we had a hard look
At whom we really are
And what we really want
And how we claim back
Our full powers
And humanness
And build a real
HU - MANS world
NOW

What do YOU think you can do about it? …

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References
