

Why do men have so much trouble expressing their emotions?

In his brilliant book, *Manhood*, Steve Biddulph tells the story of two men on neighbouring farms. These two men and their families have been neighbours for thirty years and have shared everything together over that time. They have fought bushfires, shared good times and bad, and cared for each other's wives and children as their own. Finally, after so many years, one of the families has to leave. As one of the men comes over to say goodbye to the other, their conversation goes like this:

'Well', says the mate. 'I'll be off then.'

'Yeah,' says the other. 'Thanks for coming over.'

'Look us up sometime.'

'Yeah, I reckon.'

They then climb into their vehicles and leave. And while their wives will correspond for years to come, these men will never exchange words again.^[1]

I feel emotional as I write this. Why are us men so bad at showing our love for our friends, people with whom we share every part of our lives? How could these men, who could easily be you and me, part so awkwardly after sharing thirty years of their lives together? What is wrong in the hearts of men?

It has been said that most men will have probably two or three other male friends in their life, at the very most, with whom they will feel comfortable pouring out their souls to. For many men, the only time they feel comfortable baring all to their mates is after a few beers at the pub. No wonder so many men turn to alcohol to try to deal with life's problems. If we were better at being able to show our mates our true feelings without needing a fix to help us, and be there for our mates when they bare their souls; if we were able to put an arm around them and say 'I love you mate', without worrying if saying that reflects badly on our sexuality, maybe us men wouldn't have such a high tendency towards loneliness and suicide.

One of the best movie lines I can remember was in the original *'Crocodile Dundee'*, when Paul Hogan is genuinely gob-smacked at the fact that everyone in the US seems to have their own personal therapist to whom they pay lots of money to share their lives. His response of "what, haven't they got any mates?!" is one of the most enlightening lines in any movie I have seen.

One of the reasons that men struggle so much in expressing their feelings is that, despite the increase in the number of men's groups over recent years, we still live in the shadow of our fathers' generation; a generation which knew hardship like many of us will never know. These were men who – and I know I generalise here – had a 'stick your chest out and get on with life' attitude. No wonder then that we still take on some of these characteristics. We haven't known any different. Most of us have never had fathers who have been good role models. We are deeply traumatised by the fact that when we were a little tacker looking at life, many of us could never see Dad as our hero, a man who could do everything. And so we too stick our chests out and continue the charade that 'she'll be right mate' when deep down we're often part of the lonely crowd, with people all around us but no one who really knows us.

New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, talks in one of his commentaries about Jesus' baptism, where, after Jesus comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven says "You are my dear son, with you I am well pleased". Wright says

“many children grow up in our world who have never had a father say to them 'you are my dear child', let alone, 'I'm pleased with you'. In the western world, even those fathers who think this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they are with them.”^[2]

Wright then encourages us to reflect quietly on God saying to us every day 'you are my dear child. I am delighted with you'.

Without a father as a role model, it is also no wonder that so many men, as well as turning to alcohol, turn also to

pornography to make themselves feel better. We settle for the false intimacy which porn provides, caught up in the fantasy that there is some sort of relationship with an image in a magazine or on a screen, an image that wants us and that will never reject us like people in the real world do. I saw a bumper sticker once which said 'real men don't use porn'. What a profound statement. Being a real man means being able to express ourselves in a way that is courageous. It is learning to be a man among men, no longer the little boy who wants quick and easy comfort. The tragic results of seeking such comfort are then often borne out in the effects on our partners. Many men are secretly afraid of their wives. We will not believe that our opinions and ideas in the home matter as much as theirs. Partly as a result, we don't feel close to them. I believe this is often the result of a dysfunctional relationship with our mothers. It is said that when a man loses the fear of his mother, he loses the fear of his wife.

We have been sold a lemon in our society about how men should behave. Everything around us tells us that we need to be strong and tough, to get on with it and to not waste time 'reflecting'. We are told right from childhood that boys don't cry. In school, if you were picked on and you cried, you just became an easier target. Despite this though, I believe that one of the healthy developments over the last fifteen or twenty years is the awareness that strength is not found in suppressing our emotions and just 'getting on with life'. Men are finding that there is strength in expressing our emotions and having the courage to cry in front of our mates. We are slowly learning that it is perfectly fine to bawl our eyes out when we are desperately sad. Picture cricketer Darren Lehmann's open tears at the tragic passing of his great mate David Hookey a few years ago. He is just one example of many men who are learning that we no longer need to hold everything inside.

Back in the early 1990s I first heard the term 'sensitive new age guy' or SNAG, used. The SNAG was the new male, the one who was able to cry openly and say 'I love you' without hindrance or awkwardness. Society seemed to be realising that our macho culture had to change. In recent years this term seems to have disappeared, maybe because the SNAG is still often seen as a wimp, someone with no backbone who can't assert himself when he needs to. A people pleaser. Many men are like this, so fearful of rejection that we just say yes to everyone in order to be nice and well thought of. This is not real manhood either. There is a difference between having no resilience and crying at the drop of a hat, and being able to healthily express our emotions.

Without wanting to appear glib about this and looking for a way to inevitably bring Jesus into a Christian article, I can honestly say that when I look at Jesus I see a balance. I see a balance between the strong assertive man who feared no one and was totally secure in who he was, and the sensitive gentle man who wept at the death of his good mate Lazarus and over Jerusalem. I also see him sitting little children on his knee and saying that we must become like them if we are to have any hope. Jesus was the ultimate man. The shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35, is perhaps also the most human – 'Jesus wept'. There is no record of those around him saying "what a wimp!". Instead we are told that they said "see how much he loved him". They saw the depth of feeling that Jesus was able to express for Lazarus.

One of the most helpful things that I have been told to do to deal with feelings has been to write down every day, preferably at the same time each day, five feelings that I am feeling at that time. Do it now. Think of five feelings that you are feeling right now as you read this. I bet that if you are a man reading this that you're really struggling. When I first did it, I think I came up with three feelings and that took a while. These days it is easier as I have gotten into the habit (although one of the feeling I still often write is 'uncertain' when I don't know what I'm feeling!). One thing that helped me when I started this was having a sheet of paper with me that had about fifty feeling words written on it to guide me.

Men's groups are also very helpful. Your church might even have one. If you don't go to a church, ask a few mates if they would like to catch up occasionally to talk about this stuff. It takes courage to do this. A friend of mine has said that when he started doing this, he would rather have gone to the dentist than talk about his feelings or admit that he was struggling. It makes us squirm to even think about talking to our mates about it. But it pays off. People around you will see the difference.

Finally, read books like *Manhood* by Steve Biddulph, or *The Silence of Adam* by Larry Crabb. Most of all though, read the gospels and look at Jesus, the ultimate man. If us men are going to defeat the scourge of depression, anger and loneliness in our lives, and rise above the macho culture that we are part of, we need to learn to express our feelings in a healthy way, and we can't go past the man from Nazareth as our ultimate guide.

by Nils von Kalm
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[1] Biddulph, Steve. *Manhood*, Finch Publishing, Sydney, 1995. p. 175.

[2] Wright, Tom, *Mark for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. p. 4.