

THE RIPPLE EFFECT: TAKING PREVENTATIVE ACTION IN ADDRESSING THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF MEN IN THE CHURCH

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She sat down in my office, crossed her arms and leaned back.

“He’s just turned into a different man since we got married. Back then he promised to be a loving husband to me, a dad to our kids and a leader at home, but now all I see is an irrational, lazy child. He hates his job but won’t do anything about it, and he brings that anger out on me and the kids every day. Or even worse than his outbursts, he just ignores us and watches TV all night. He pretty much just sleeps, works, sits on the couch, sleeps, works... you get the picture. He never wants to spend time with me—unless he wants sex. Actually, he doesn’t spend time with anyone anymore.”

In my experience counseling couples, I have heard these same disappointments spill out of the mouths of hundreds of wives. Women recognize their husbands’ dissatisfaction and passivity. Children sense their father’s emotional distance. They feel disconnected, unwanted and lonely as he withdraws into his fears and anxieties. If unaddressed, these symptoms and behaviors often lead to more serious mental health concerns for the whole family. Most churches underestimate the effect men have on the wellbeing of an entire family or community, and the resulting importance of effectively guiding the men in their congregation. A child may spend several hours at church on Sunday learning that God is their Father, but their experience with their earthly father over the following six days often skews that message. A wife wants to communicate intimately with her husband, yet he

responds with “I don’t know,” “fine” or gives her a blank look. A son senses his father’s unwillingness to connect with him, contributing to his eventual exodus from the church as a young adult. Because of their lack of godly male role models, young men conclude that church is for women. Supportive relationships between men diminish, leaving them to face job challenges, sinful impulses, physical diseases and other life difficulties alone.

These issues typically occur because the church lacks a clear plan and suitable funds to invest in the development of men and their role as leaders. Fatherless boys need mentors. Young girls need godly examples of how a man should treat them. Women look for trustworthy male friends and supportive husbands. The elderly need physical support. Investing in the men of the church can create a resource on which the rest of the congregation can rely.

In my book *Why Not Try to Hit the Real Target—Men*, I set forth the case that one of the chief goals of a pastor should be to help the men in his church experience complete spiritual growth. This includes an intimate walk with Jesus, understanding God’s Word, consistently applying their faith to all of their relationships, and addressing spiritual or emotional issues in their life. As a church works to develop and strengthen manly leaders, their relational influence within the church, the families they represent and their community enhances all other areas of the church’s mission. When males exchange their aimlessness and passivity for a grounded identity in God, the church gains a powerful resource to help effectively carry out its mission.

One study found that in families with a mother who regularly practiced religion and a non-practicing father, only 1.5 percent of children continued to practice religion regularly;

however, if the father regularly practiced religion, 44.2 percent of those children adopted the same practice.¹ This chapter will look at several areas the church can focus on to help its men live spiritually strong, addiction free, relationally healthy, satisfying and productive lives—while subsequently increasing the effectiveness of the whole church.

Many of the mental health issues that challenge men begin as a result of a male’s inability to cope with and adapt to the common struggles all men face. Without access to positive mentorship, males allow destructive influences to guide their decision-making, which often causes them to develop negative symptoms that further impede on their ability to make good choices. Experiencing “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7, NKJV²) as well as the fruit of a Spirit-led life (Galatians 5:13-26) becomes difficult for males who struggle with managing their emotions, recognizing their offensive style of communication, listening to their conscience, behaving compulsively, abusing substances, dwelling on negative thoughts and fears, relying on problematic relationships or dealing with an unbalanced biological chemistry. As Christ’s representative, the church is responsible for portraying Jesus’s message of redemption and positive change to men, along with teaching them to become Jesus’s best. Helping men become more whole occurs when an effective men’s ministry offers specific forms of guidance and counseling for the entrenched issues mentioned above.

When we recognize and understand the areas of life that are difficult for men, we can begin to guide them through these challenges. Every man will encounter five specific

¹ European Population Committee (CDPO), “The Demographic Characteristics of Linguistic and Religious Groups in Switzerland,” *Council of Europe*, 1999,

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016804fb7b1>.

² Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version® Bible. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

struggles throughout his life: the search for manhood, male isolation, emotional disconnect, cultural attacks and pursuing manly action. These struggles result from a sin-filled world colliding with an imperfect male. Understanding these challenges will help the church effectively deal with the emotional, cognitive, relational, physical and spiritual needs of the men in their church. Jesus calls us to be fully functioning men of God; His mission of making disciples (Matthew 28:16-20) demands that we fully develop the potential and skills He has given us. Studying our potential areas of weakness can also help us prepare for the constant spiritual war around us (Ephesians 6:12).

STRUGGLE 1: SEARCHING FOR MANHOOD

Despite a male's strong desire to achieve manhood, he is often inhibited by an inability to figure out what manhood is. Unfortunately, in a world that groans under the stress of separation from God (Romans 8:22), cultural changes and distorted thinking have skewed the true definition of manhood. When manhood is defined by external achievements, such as war and work, men overlook their responsibility to be present as positive role models to their family. When manhood is defined by a specific occupation rather than internal character, men find themselves angry and lost as the definition of men's and women's roles change. When defined by immediate gratification, fathers ignore their need to sacrifice for the benefit of their child.

Other inadequate definitions of manhood rely on age, driving ability, aggression, sexual prowess, money and fashion. Our culture rarely teaches or expects men to display integrity, perseverance, courage, toughness, sacrifice, contribution, wise risk-taking, protection, respect or honor. Jesus, the Ultimate Man, cried over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44)

and the death of Lazarus (John 11:32-36). He recognized the internal pain of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), intellectually sparred with the hypocritical Pharisees (Matthew 22:15-40) and physically expressed His respect and protection of the temple and what it stood for (Matthew 21:12-13). Unfortunately, this emotional expressiveness has been cast aside as aimless and passive males fail to become mature men who uphold structure and leadership. As a result of this great loss, our culture continues to move toward darkness.

Some research suggests that by age three and a half boys develop beliefs of what males do and what females do.³ Once these beliefs are established, the hormone MIS (Müllerian inhibiting substance) causes them to avoid behaviors they perceive as feminine. These early beliefs are deeply engrained and serve as a code of conduct.⁴ I believe this tendency has contributed to the current exodus of males between age 17 and 27 from the church. These young males observe how the different genders involve themselves in church and notice that the majority of church programming is geared toward women and children. This conclusion leads many males to define church as a more feminine interest.

The church can change this disastrous pattern by focusing on men's ministry and establishing a men's program that associates the church with manhood through emphasizing the characteristics of Jesus Christ, the Ultimate Man. Although it involves a considerable investment of energy, the challenge of manhood can be taught and granted. I have seen males of all ages and cultural backgrounds respond positively as a church's intervention meets their inherent drive to achieve manhood. Men over 80 years old have

³ Louann Brizendine, *The Male Brain* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

had tears in their eyes as their lifetime goal of achieving manhood has been affirmed within a church setting.

Our culture encourages men to live with an attitude of complacency. When manhood is defined as a series of positive behaviors or a regular confrontation with our self-destructive actions, males tend to respond to life differently. Instead of abstractly viewing sin as inevitable, a male can learn to judge his own actions as either manly or unmanly. Abstract theological concepts become relatable beliefs when a man learns that taking his wife out on a date is a manly act, while involving himself in pornography is not. In this way, manhood becomes a synonym for sanctification.

STRUGGLE 2: THE ISOLATION OF MALES

Many men struggle with the tendency to isolate themselves and often accept the myth that living disconnected from a support system is manly. Territorial, aggressive and competitive tendencies influence them to ignore their need for others. Many men have not been involved in a community of males striving, confronting and encouraging each other since their teenage years in high school sports. They now describe their close friendships with other men as non-existent. Studies show that most males claim not to have any close male friendships. Many rely on a series of acquaintances in order to avoid what they perceive as more “sticky” intimate relationships. Males often act on an underlying fear that close relationships bring with them an emotional obligation or responsibility that may limit their freedom.

The male tendency to avoid close relationships is usually manifested in an aversion toward change, meeting new people and interacting in social environments. Instead of

approaching new situations with courage, many men resort to unhealthy coping methods like social withdrawal or alcohol use. The symptoms that isolation can generate pave the way for future destructive relationships, an ongoing sense of loneliness, long-term depression and addiction. Although essentially negative, feelings like depression and loneliness serve as unwanted consequences that can compel an isolated man to pursue the healthy companionship and mutual support experienced in interpersonal relationships.⁵ Maturing into manhood is demonstrated by a male's development of social skills, awareness of the needs of others and ability to manage the emotional responses of both himself and others. Jesus serves as an excellent example of how to deal with a wide range of people, opinions and viewpoints, while maintaining focus on God's will. It is important that the church spends time developing the social skills of its men so they can better follow Jesus's command to love others.

Spiritually speaking, we know that the predators of life attack us when we are lonely, discouraged or living with secret sin. This fact highlights the importance of developing a strong community of men within the church setting. This type of experience gives men the opportunity to work on the relationship skills they need in their homes and workplaces. Through the continual dynamics of confrontation, encouragement, mutual sharing, celebration and accountability, men effectively sharpen each other's identity and character (Proverbs 27:17). This environment allows men to process the important decisions and challenges they face daily. By speaking into each other's lives, these men act as

⁵ Louann Brizendine, *The Male Brain* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 119.

representatives of Jesus. Prayer, biblically-based discussion and conversations about their personal journey help men develop their spirituality.

Jesus's example demonstrated the importance of relationships. He expressed a wide range of social skills, maintained mutually-supportive friendships and contributed to the life of each individual He met. He modeled humanity's need for a diverse group of people to serve as a support system. Jesus had over 12 individuals in His support system—shouldn't we have at least six?

When speaking at different conferences, I often ask males the following question: if life were to suddenly crash in on you, could you name six men you could call on and know they would be there for you? Most men have trouble naming one non-relative; most women can name six fairly quickly. A church, sports teams, club, military unit or bar can each help a man build a support team—I wonder which one God views as the best source?

As a brief aside, I want to mention two ways many churches unknowingly limit their effectiveness by overlooking the importance of male involvement. First, while couples' groups can aid a man's development, they cannot meet his need for a band of brothers. Mixed gender groups can limit a man's growth because of the differences in how males and females communicate. The male tendency to put up a false front and the sensitive nature of certain topics makes it less likely for a male to be completely honest in mixed gender groups. When a church focuses its energy solely on couples' groups, it often overlooks the need to address vital issues that are specific to men.

Second, having counseled numerous pastors over the years, I have found that even they often struggle with the male tendency to want to isolate themselves. This fact may

contribute to the statistical improbability of pastors initiating and leading men's groups. As men themselves, they often have difficulty recognizing or wanting to meet their own basic need for support. Most women will wholeheartedly support their church creating opportunities for men to meet and spiritually grow together. Wives know that they cannot meet all of their husband's relational and social needs, even though their husbands often expect them to. This leaves many women frustrated as they try to cope with issues that only a group of men can properly address.

STRUGGLE 3: BEING EMOTIONALLY DISCONNECTED

Our culture works to destroy men by encouraging them not to feel. Basic emotional responses like crying are defined as childish. Males are expected to overcome the natural fears of life by denying the healthy anxiety they experience. Our culture teaches young boys to be tough above all else, suppressing other emotional responses that conflict with this image. With all these factors working against them, males often struggle with managing their emotional responses and expressing their feelings to others.

God created man with a smorgasbord of emotional capabilities, but life, cultural and parental influences often limit their emotional expression. Males learn that anger is the chief acceptable feeling, which appeals to their aggressive hormone testosterone. As a result, males learn to express emotions, especially anxiety or sadness, through anger. No one can get through life without being hurt in some way. We experience pain because of our own choices, the negative acts of others and life circumstances that are beyond our control. A man must learn to recognize his feelings, put them into words and talk about them with others so that he can gain emotional support and do "grief work." This process

allows a man to move beyond his disappointment. Many mental health issues are linked to a negative life event that has never been emotionally digested. One painful experience can overshadow a man's self-definition for the rest of his life. Rather than dealing with their issues head-on, men hold their emotional freedom hostage and sow the bitter seeds of unforgiveness, self-condemnation and stunted emotional growth.

Another problem that men run into is treating their feelings the same way they treat their thoughts. Thoughts contain timelines, are linear and can be neatly organized and compartmentalized. Emotions, on the other hand, are usually blended together. When a father has unprocessed emotions that result in frequent flashbacks to his time at war, it affects his ability to be vulnerable and love his family well. When a man experiences a life loss, he must work through his grief and process his feelings within an emotionally supportive relationship. Jesus expressed grief and connected to His emotional makeup. As the time of His death approached, He drew on His closest relationships for prayer and support (Matthew 26:36-38). An effective church ministry acts as a catalyst for men to build these types of relationships and find mutual support during the natural grief of life.

When a male remains stuck in an emotionally disconnected or dysfunctional state, he limits the level of intimacy he can experience with others. Without processing his own feelings, he cannot feel or express empathy for others. In this way, a husband's lack of emotional development harms his wife. This factor alone causes many women to support church activities that equip their husbands to strengthen their relationships. Developing emotional intelligence can also improve a man's work life. Leadership necessitates that a man helps everyone around him be more productive. This type of motivation happens most

often through his interpersonal interactions. A man can limit the prevalence of sexual harassment, hostile work environments and other negative work experiences simply by expressing all of who God created him to be within the workplace.

By providing programming that teaches men to express their God-given emotions, the church can help limit some of the mental health and addiction issues males would otherwise experience. God created us to be relational with Him and with each other, saying, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Emotions serve as the social “grease” within these relationships. As stated in the book *Why Not Try to Hit the Real*

Target—Men:

By providing a forum for encouraging men’s relationships with each other, the church provides a support structure for talking about and grieving the losses of life. Developing the ability to love God, others and oneself in Christ-like ways is a significant manhood achievement (Mark 12:30). Men must be encouraged to talk to each other in ways that build emotional bonds and stimulate spiritual growth (p. 61).

STRUGGLE 4: THE CULTURE—ALWAYS IN ATTACK MODE

Modern media constantly reinforces our culture’s negative perceptions of manhood. Commercials manipulate men by stimulating their sex drive in order to sell products. Sitcoms portray fathers who speak and act in inappropriate ways while their wife and children attempt to make up for their inadequacies. Our culture also discounts a man’s responsibility to act respectfully. It attempts to suppress natural male aggression by neutering, domesticating and encouraging passivity in men. There is a difference between

violence and violating others which is rarely condoned and limiting the male process of wrestling with others so that they can discover and develop their full potential. Men are aggressive. Many males accept this culture of low expectations and live down to it.

God calls each man to fulfill a specific purpose (Jeremiah 1:5); ignoring this call will only lead to further mental health struggles. Victor Frankl, who writes about his concentration camp experiences, reinforces the idea that everyone must have a sense of meaning in their life in order to be whole.⁶ When a man does not build his life on a meaningful relationship with God, he may misunderstand his designed purpose. God's purpose for an individual can only be fully developed within His plan. God created each man to be His artist by reflecting his identity and soul through some type of expressive action or accomplishment (Romans 1:20). God's plan is expressed through a mechanic accurately diagnosing a car's defect, or a teacher guiding a student to recognize truth through paying attention to multiple levels of an experience. Untapped or underdeveloped potential haunts many men, and the disease of male passivity has become an epidemic. Individuals who sit around complaining or fail to get off the couch of life put themselves at risk when they do not ask God for His empowerment to be cultural change agents.

Our culture also harms males by suppressing their natural curiosity and desire to learn. Much of our current educational system is verbally-based rather than action-oriented. Since only a small percentage of males possess high verbal skills, few succeed in this type of setting. Young boys often believe something is wrong with them because they do not want to sit quietly. When boys equate school and learning with boredom and frustration, they

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

stifle their curious tendencies and potential skills. God has given each man unique interests that can aid the entire community when developed. The church can guide them toward their natural gifts by understanding the wide diversity of masculine skills. This focus encourages each man to contribute his own unique interests to the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Whether a man volunteers as a greeter or cooks eggs for a prayer breakfast, he is sharing his faith and becoming spiritually stronger as a result. The Christian culture often harms its mission by attempting to draw men in through teaching abstract theological concepts and rules. Instead, the church must first meet a man where he is by addressing his specific needs and skills, simultaneously showing him to how apply biblical teaching to his everyday life. This approach allows men to express and celebrate each other's gifts.

Additionally, by establishing an effective men's ministry, churches can help men share their faith with others. Many males feel inadequate discussing their faith, just like they do when they share any of their abstract thoughts. Instead, these men can invite a friend to an organized church program that reflects their own beliefs. Unfulfilled potential leads to depression, anxiety and general life dissatisfaction. Helping each man fulfill the Great Commission within his own skill set blesses both the man and the church community.

An effective men's ministry confronts the culture's constant attack by challenging men to live according to Christ-like standards. It expects men to follow their God-given dreams and creates church events that help men fulfill their specific ministry needs. Men often experience spiritual growth by participating in projects that contribute to the community. Encouraging men to take action in this way confronts their negative thoughts and behaviors, challenges them to understand their complexity (Psalm 139) and motivates

them to use all of who they are for God's glory. God's message of redemption and purpose contradicts the culture's message that men are simple, sexual, aimless and angry. The church can uphold a code of honor and standard of behavior that will inspire men to say to the world, "I am not like how you define me to be—I am God's."

It should be noted that those who attempt to create a positive spiritual environment for men will become the focus of cultural attack. Satan knows that by attacking men he can simultaneously oppress and discourage women and distort the thinking of children who look up to them. Leading men will challenge you to test the authenticity of your faith. I believe Satan is a strong opponent and knows the positive domino effect that happens when formerly passive males sacrifice themselves for a greater cause and use their gifts for God's glory. An immature, ungodly male lies at the root of many of our culture's problems. For permanent cultural change to occur, the church must unleash the power that godly men bring, which is certainly a force to be reckoned with.

STRUGGLE 5: WHAT DOES A REAL MAN DO?

The first struggle we discussed addressed the need to define manhood from a godly perspective, which can be positively reinforced by a church men's group that guides men to define manhood through an understanding of Jesus's character. Struggle 5 steps further into this definition of manhood by addressing the need to translate a Christ-like identity into Christ-like action. God designed men to move. The hormone testosterone compels men to pursue territorial conquests, master their physical environment, physically protect what they love, climb the social ladder and compete with other men for status. It draws men toward challenges that measure their strength, test their limits and stretch their personal

boundaries (especially in adolescence). Men possess a natural attraction to action. This instinct was keenly displayed when Peter attempted to walk on water to show his faith in Christ (Matthew 14:25-29).

Just like God gave Adam a specific job to do in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15), God also gives each man a specific job to complete. When asked to describe himself, most men will include what they do for a living. The kinesthetic results of finishing work-related tasks help a man develop himself and understand who he is. Men often lose their sense of wellbeing and experience mental health issues when their work is disrupted for an extended period of time; it even takes longer for a man to recover from the loss of a job than the loss of a loved one.⁷ Several mental and emotional needs are met through a man's job. Beyond financial compensation, a man's job challenges him to reach his full potential and provides him with a sense of meaning, self-respect, connection and contribution.

Men need a safe space to be able to talk about work issues and learn how to live out their faith at their job. The women's movement left many males confused, angry and withdrawn because their sense of identity and manhood relied too much on what they did for a living. This existential crisis points to the problems that occur when an individual or culture overemphasizes external achievements. If a man does not address his internal emotions and thoughts, his behaviors will remain unchanged. The church can help men adjust to life by teaching them to measure their actions by the integrity of their character rather than their occupation. The Bible highlights the importance of a man's walk with Jesus Christ and how it is reflected in his everyday life (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). As his relationship

⁷ Tom Rath and Jim Harter, *Wellbeing* (New York: Gallup Press, 2010), 17.

with Jesus matures, he becomes less dependent on finding his identity in upholding his external status, accomplishments or occupation. Men will move toward this mindset when the church teaches them how to live out the fruit of the Spirit in their daily lives (James 1:22).

It is important that men take into consideration how their genetic predispositions and physical self-care can affect every area of their life. Men must learn to appreciate the way God crafted their physical bodies and ask for His help in achieving their body's full potential. Furthermore, it is imperative that men recognize their role as a servant leader in their home. They must strive to be present for their loved ones and make their lives better. A godly man chooses friends who will build him up rather than derail his manly efforts. He involves himself in ministry to fulfill his eternal purpose. He builds his life on God's Word so that he can accurately distinguish between Christ-like and immature behaviors.

Although God created men for action and challenge, many give in to passivity. Their skills and mental dexterity atrophy as they choose addictive behaviors and mindless distractions to numb their need for action. Life becomes a monotonous series of routines as men overlook the miraculousness of God's Spirit and instead choose a life of ease. Males become observers rather than responsible participants in their experiences. They suppress their instinct to sacrifice themselves for the greater good by allowing self-centered comfort to take precedence.

Jesus demonstrated manly action by balancing His time between prayer and actively meeting the needs of others. The church can guide men to do the same by providing opportunities for men to participate in godly action, while simultaneously growing closer to

Jesus, forming bonds with each other and learning about their God-given design. Like an unused car that slowly crumbles, a man who gives in to passivity wastes his potential. Men are most satisfied when their actions are inspired by God. When churches focus on motivating men toward Godly action, they will simultaneously meet the spiritual and practical needs of the community and provide a way to alleviate some of the existential concerns that affect the mental health of men.

A church with a strong men's program not only provides its attendees with an opportunity to grow spiritually, but also helps prevent mental health issues by encouraging men to build personal support systems. Jesus Christ exemplified the type of support system that is essential to a man's success and life satisfaction. For these types of relationships to grow, a men's program must give participants enough time to talk about how they think and feel about life. Meeting times must be regular and consistent so that their natural defensiveness has time to develop into trust. Many churches unintentionally harm their males through the intermittent nature of their men's programs. Meetings scheduled with long periods of time between them inhibit strong, long-term relational connections between men. Irregular group meetings limit men from becoming as supportive and intimate as possible.

God calls the church to minister to all of its members. By focusing on the men of the congregation, churches will simultaneously benefit their families, friends and communities. This process starts by addressing the five struggles of manhood and tackling the connected mental health and addiction issues head-on. Through an effective, Christ-centered church program, a male who is struggling with such issues can learn to rely on the support of a

group of men working together. Jesus ministered to others on several levels while also maintaining a focused relationship with God. In the same way, the church can offer an opportunity for men to experience holistic growth through learning, praying and talking with one another. It is this leadership response that will maximize the church's effectiveness within the community it is called to serve.