

A real man or really a man? What contribution is needed today for the primary prevention of gender-based violence and to support the mental health of children, adolescents and men

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ABSTRACT. – Emotional distress and the difficulty of seeking help and psychotherapeutic support are more characteristic of the male gender. Males grow up adhering to the model of the ‘real man’, a model often impregnated with gender stereotypes that force them to adhere to a gender role in which the emotional experience is often denied or invalidated and the request for help is experienced as an individual vulnerability and not as a resource to face a developmental or life challenge. This often leaves males, both developmental and adult, in a condition of emotional illiteracy that can be prodromal and preparatory to problems of clinical and social relevance, up to and including gender-based violence. This article addresses the issue of men’s emotional distress, reading it as a phenomenon rooted in the gender role favoured by the socio-cultural context and highlighting the role that could be played by primary and secondary prevention and by educational intervention in the school and community context as facilitators of change, evolution and promotion of the psycho-emotional well-being of future generations.

Key words: gender education; gender violence; masculinity; fatherhood.

The emotional pain of men

As therapists, we are often confronted with the difficulty in asking for help manifested by boys and men when they need psychological support. Men’s suffering and emotional pain often remain invisible, unspoken, and unshared within interpersonal relationships, and the unwillingness to seek specialist and professional help – when suffering and emotional pain appear in a man’s life – represents one of the most evident risk factors for the development of problems in the psychopathological and psychiatric area. In

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the literature, we have many studies that denounce the ‘gender gap’ between male and female with respect to seeking help from a mental health specialist (Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003; Nam *et al.*, 2010). The motivations for giving up or struggling to ask for help are often embodied in the very model of masculinity that is proposed to those born male: asking for help at a time of existential difficulty and emotional distress would be tantamount to showing oneself to be fragile and vulnerable (Brooks, 2001; Cleary, 2012). In an Irish qualitative research conducted through focus groups and face-to-face interviews, Lynch *et al.* (2018) identified seven different factors that represent barriers for male subjects’ seeking professional support: acceptance by one’s peer group; personal challenges; influences produced by culture and environment; self-medication through alcohol use; social norms related to men’s seeking professional support; fear of encountering homophobic reactions; and cultural stereotypes around masculinity. Sufke (2011) wrote:

‘In men, too, there is the unexpressed. Their silence, however, has a completely different valence. It is not to the interlocutor that emotions remain completely unexpressed, but to themselves. Hardly any of them, moreover, expect attention or reference to it. They no longer expect it. Not since, feeling hurt as a child, they have shut themselves away or become enraged and, as a result, have only been ignored or punished. Later, in the peer group, confrontations and fights took place very openly. No one ever paid attention to unexpressed emotions, nor did they think they could.’

Gender culture and male gender stereotypes

Men’s emotional suffering belongs to a ‘given’ of male gender culture. The expression of one’s own emotional ‘truth’ is – often or sometimes, depending on the context – decried and branded as an indicator of male feminization. Crying to express sadness, asking for help to cope with anxiety and fear, becoming aware of one’s psychological and emotional vulnerability are prerequisites for ‘inhabiting’ one’s inner world while remaining connected to oneself and one’s feelings. In male culture, however, gender stereotypes have been consolidated that often make it impossible or extremely difficult to manage one’s emotions in a way that is functional to one’s psychological needs. Being ‘a real man’ often implies giving up the possibility of being ‘really a man’ (Pellai, 2023). The formation and growth of the child who becomes an adolescent and then a young man, is forged on the model of the man who ‘must never ask’, in which the gender role is strongly constrained by the implicit code of virility that coincides with a masculinity devoted to the dimension of power (Zimbardo & Coulombe, 2017). Being strong, active, emotionally unflappable seems to be the best way to identify with one’s

‘being male’. And this often entails generating one’s own identity around a false self with which to move through life respecting the expectations around the gender role that the gaze of others continues to seek confirmation of. The result is a profound unease that has repercussions on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. And which today, through a new gender culture and the gender education actions that are increasingly being promoted at school and community level, could lead to a profound change and transformation of the growth path of male subjects.

‘Close’: a film to understand the problem

An example of how the definition of identity is strongly impacted and conditioned by gender stereotypes and leads to deep and dangerous pathogenic drifts in the course of development, is exemplarily described in the film ‘Close’ by director Lukas Dhont, released in 2022. The plot centres around the events of Leo and Remi, two pre-adolescents who share an intimate and profound friendship, spending many days together in the summer before they enter middle school. They are two very young people who know how to understand each other beyond the words they say to each other, and know how to be a support for each other in a completely natural and spontaneous way. It is with the strength of this bond that Leo and Remi enter school where their classmates follow different rules of coexistence, particularly where boys are concerned. The friendship that binds Leo and Remi based on physical gestures, contact and glances (Leo and Remi even at a distance remain connected to each other because they seek each other out through glances) is very different from the way other male classmates socialise. For this reason, classmates one day ask the two boys whether theirs – instead of being a simple friendship story – is also a love story. Faced with the suspicion that their bond is perceived as allegedly homosexual, the relationship between Leo and Remi gradually changes. That perfect, complicit and intimate balance that characterised their bond is shattered. While continuing to see and hang out with each other, the daily routine of gestures and words changes completely and Leo begins to follow the rules of ‘male’ socialisation by adhering to the models he sees embodied in the behaviour of his other companions. Remi is completely bewildered by the change in the register of his friendship with Leo, and from that moment on, the story of the two boys will take on dramatic tones until it turns into tragedy. ‘Close’ is a beautiful film, very deep, intense and touching. It shows how the fact of being born male leads to denying the possibility of living friendship relationships with authenticity and spontaneity. In particular, it highlights how the conquest of intimacy, within a deep bond, can be considered more of a danger than a resource in the male world. The director

shows how entry into ‘society’ (here represented by entry into school) almost unconsciously leads one to adapt to expectations and gender stereotypes that block and inhibit in the male world the possibility of openly and sincerely expressing one’s emotions, one’s affections and one’s need for closeness and protection in relationships with others. Thus, the look of complicity that binds Leo and Remi, their ability to be close to each other even through the language of physical and bodily contact (in the film never contaminated by the dimension of sexual arousal or by the perception of a latent homosexuality) that characterises their bond in the film’s opening scenes, gradually turns into something else. Their gazes become sad and confused, the two boys no longer know how to adapt their need for closeness and intimacy with each other to the rules that, informally and almost unconsciously, the outside world imposes on them. In the film, the director shows us why the male world transforms deep emotional needs into often violent acts. He helps us to understand why in the male world is easier to adhere to the logic of confrontation rather than that of encounter; to the dynamics of competition rather than those of cooperation.

The will to change

What ‘Close’ enacts, within a masterful cinematic narrative, is a common experience for those involved in psychology and psychotherapy. It is common to come across, in the clinical context, but also in the development of community-based educational and preventive actions, involving class groups at school or groups of adolescents in educational settings (such as sports and/or parish settings), the inability of males to access their inner world in a way that is functional to their emotional needs (French, 2007; Addis, 2013).

In an essay entitled ‘The Will to Change’ (2022), entirely dedicated to promoting the transformation of the male gender role (starting – *inter alia* – from a feminist perspective), Bell Hooks calls men’s emotional illiteracy the source of greatest suffering in their life journey and proposes a radical transformation of the way in which the gender education of those born male is approached.

In my experience as a man, father of four, psychotherapist and prevention specialist – referent for many projects aimed at pre-adolescents and adolescents – I have asked myself what directions to take in order to change this ‘status quo’ and guarantee future generations of men those emotional competences and life skills (‘life skills’ as the World Health Organization calls them) capable of fostering the transition from the model of the real man to that of really a man, allowing the overcoming of those gender stereotypes that so significantly and profoundly define a model of masculin-

ity that today we have learned to consider and define as ‘toxic’. It is not an easy transition, because as Hooks herself states again (2022): ‘The reality is that men are suffering and the whole of culture responds by saying ‘Please don’t tell us what you feel’. If we cannot heal suffering that we cannot feel, by supporting the patriarchal culture that pushes men to deny feelings, we condemn them to live in a state of emotional torpor. We construct a culture in which male pain cannot have a voice, cannot be mentioned or cared for. It is not only men who do not take their pain seriously. Most women do not want to acknowledge male pain if it interferes with the satisfaction of female desire’.

Secondary prevention

I think this warning also makes a lot of sense in relation to one of the most relevant social emergencies today, of which the media offer us – unfortunately – news almost daily: gender violence and femicide. The dynamics almost always implicated in most of these events is that whereby the breaking of the bond, which implies loss of closeness and intimacy, declined in male gender culture also as loss of control and dominance in the relationship with an affective partner, leads the man to explode with a violent and criminal act that literally takes the person who instead one would like to keep ‘inside’ the relationship ‘outside’ it. The paradoxical act, almost always motivated, in the media reading of these facts by the need for possession and power, could in reality – in a more psychological perspective – be the consequence of a ‘disorganised’ and unlearned way of managing emotions such as sadness related to abandonment and loss of closeness and fear related to the sense of isolation and inadequacy in perceiving oneself abandoned, all aspects that in the perspective of Bowlby’s attachment theory (1979; 1989) require good self-regulatory skills with respect to emotions such as sadness and fear which are never acquired in growing up male. Anger therefore remains the only way to act all that is ‘felt’ as a source of discomfort and psychic suffering. The prevention of gender-based violence represents today, perhaps, the most evident social emergency calling for an intervention aimed at transforming and reducing all those risk factors that are still so present and evident in men’s growth and life. It is interesting to note that many actions to prevent gender-based violence have been developed at every level with the aim of eradicating the phenomenon from our society. Almost all of these interventions are, however, based on an approach to the topic based on the recognition of the indicators – early, but not only – that place a relationship between two loving partners at risk, turning it into a dysfunctional and violent one. In preventive interventions, the main message shared with those involved is to help women become aware of the behaviours that place a rela-

tionship at risk of becoming violent. In this type of intervention, girls and women receive information and skills on how to recognise a dysfunctional relationship, how to escape from the manipulative dynamics of a violent partner, and how to ask for help when one perceives oneself to be 'at risk' in one's current affective relationship. These are preventive objectives of fundamental importance for the reduction and eradication of gender-based violence. However, these are secondary prevention interventions, *i.e.*, interventions aimed at risk reduction, at recognising a potentially unhealthy relationship at an early stage. In this approach, the core of the preventive message is based on a narrative that always places the 'male' in the position of a potential aggressor. Boys and men who are involved in this preventive approach can only be confronted with the role of the violent male, learning to understand his dynamics and characteristics in the hope that they will be able to avoid identifying with that type of functioning within interpersonal relationships. What is lacking, however, in the preventive paths, is an educational and training component that provides the male with socio-emotional and relational training capable of equipping boys and men with emotional, communicational and socio-relational skills functional to inhabit life and intimate relationships with satisfaction, effectiveness and appropriate modalities. While it is true that the context of life and growth tends to amplify adherence to the stereotyped model of the 'real man', primary prevention should be based on the promotion of educational and training actions that enable male subjects throughout their lives to deal with proposals aimed at promoting their emotional competence and awareness.

In today's most widespread model of preventing gender-based violence, the masculinity that is staged is the one that responds to the stereotype of the 'real man' and responds to the rules implicit in the model of patriarchy that has been analysed, deconstructed and profoundly challenged in recent decades by the analysis and criticism produced within feminist culture. Allowing men to see how necessary it is to move away from masculinity anchored in the patriarchal model is of enormous importance. At the same time, however, it becomes necessary to propose to men a new model of masculinity in which the 'gender role' can be modulated in ways that allow them to get in touch with their own inner truth, with that awareness of their own 'being and feeling' capable of avoiding the construction and structuring of a 'false self' modelled around gender stereotypes that must be abandoned.

Primary prevention: a paradigm change

In this perspective, primary prevention turns out to be the level of intervention that can really produce the desired change. It is realised through gender education strategies addressed to male subjects with the aim of

encouraging their adherence to a new model of masculinity and gender role. By gender education we mean the set of actions and attentions implemented within educational contexts and aimed at promoting a new sensitivity concerning the gender experience, gender roles and gender relations of subjects of developmental age. In particular, the two dimensions that are fundamental in this educational perspective are those present in emotional education and affective and sexual education. Emotional education represents the most effective strategy for dealing with emotional illiteracy, which we have seen to be one of the obstacles to the possibility for children and young people to structure a true self, in the course of their growth, capable of recognising, validating and managing their emotional states, without actions of denial or falsification. The founding aspects of emotional education are usually structured within the relationship between child and caregiver and correspond to all those self-regulatory skills that the child acquires thanks to the relationship with those who take care of his/her growth and care. In recent decades, emotional education has become an educational component of many educational proposals in schools of all levels. Although it is not envisaged in ministerial curricula, it is strongly promoted and supported by parents, educators and teachers alike. Educating those who are growing up to recognise and manage their emotional states is one of the requirements also present in the model proposed by the World Health Organization in the model defined as Life Skills Based Education (WHO, 1999 ;2004). It is an education which in the cognitivist model goes hand in hand with the concept of 'psycho-education', consisting in providing the subject with whom one relates with the knowledge that enables him to have an understanding of his own mental functioning, of the way he reacts emotionally to the different events with which he is confronted. Whereas psycho-educational work provides metacognitive skills to the patient during psychotherapy sessions, emotional education, on the other hand, acts at a more precocious and group level and allows each pupil to be equipped with the skills to become aware of their own emotional experiences, learning to self-regulate them, so as not to generate the short circuit that leads to dysfunctional acts typical of a lack of emotional-cognitive integration. It was Howard Gardner (1987; 2004) who provided the theoretical model of reference that led to the development of emotional education courses in schools. The scholar is, in fact, the one who formulated the model of 'multiple intelligences', a model that has also had a great impact on the 'way of doing school' and the development of school curricula worldwide. Within his own model, Gardner states that the 'multiple intelligences' of each child also include: i) interpersonal intelligence, consisting of the ability to understand others and to build a model of interpersonal relations oriented towards cooperativeness; ii) intrapersonal intelligence, understood as an inward-looking self-reflective capacity based on the ability to form an accurate and truthful model of one-

self. If the core of interpersonal intelligence includes the ability to distinguish and respond appropriately to the moods, temperament, motivations and desires of others, that of intrapersonal intelligence relies on the development of individual skills useful for accessing knowledge of oneself and one's feelings and moods. These two intelligences converged in the work of Daniel Goleman (1996), who contributed so much to understanding what 'emotional intelligence' is, which he defined as 'the ability to motivate oneself, to persist in pursuing a goal despite frustrations, to control impulses and postpone gratification, to modulate one's moods, preventing suffering from preventing us from thinking, from being empathetic, from hoping' (Goleman, 1996). Emotional education is aimed at enhancing the subject's emotional intelligence and, in the case of males, would allow access to the recognition, validation and adequate processing of those emotions that the male gender culture tends to repress and not to consider adequate to express and share in one's own life context. The sphere *par excellence* in which to promote this educational-preventive strategy is the school environment, which would make it possible to transform it into a dimension that supports and accompanies those growing up in the different phases of their development and which, by promoting it in the classroom, would also make it possible to facilitate learning in an interpersonal context capable of fostering dialogue and exchange between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine'.

Affective and sex education

While girls are almost always flanked and supported by their mothers in the knowledge of their own bodies and their transformations in the course of pubertal development, the same cannot be said for the relationship between fathers and their male children. Male growth often takes place in the educational desert of the adult world in terms of affective and sexual education. The spermarch (*i.e.*, the first emission of sperm by nocturnal pollution or masturbation) – which from the point of view of sexual development coincides with the phenomenon of menarche in girls – occurs without anyone having prepared boys for this event. Research tells us that the majority of pre-adolescent males surf and explore pornographic sites, and even this type of behaviour is almost never accompanied by adult educational intervention. Therefore, males often find themselves alone, confused and aroused, immersed in a territory that provides images and narratives in which the feminine is narrated exclusively as a body, from which pleasure is to be taken and given. Again, behavioural epidemiological research (Carnevali *et al.*, 2022), has revealed that in recent years – those that have coincided with the increasingly intense and precocious diffusion of the possession of smartphones by subjects of developmental age – the consumption

of pornography by the very young has seen a growing and increasingly widespread habit of exploring videos and images in which sexuality is connoted through violent behaviour that even goes as far as the representation of rape scenes (Romito *et al.*, 2015). More generally, we can say that in pornography we often find over-represented the stereotype of the woman who, when faced with the proposal of a sexual encounter, says no, actually wanting to say yes. In pornography, this often involves the man 'taking the woman' and bringing her to orgasm, heedless of the initial lack of consent. The virtualisation of the lives of the very young, their being present in territories 'forbidden to minors' and the use of content in which arousal is the only element that connotes the representation of sexuality, outside of any relational and emotional dimension, often lead males to fail to contemplate the importance of building a relationship characterised by intimacy and emotional closeness in the encounter with the opposite sex, favouring only contact for the purpose of obtaining pleasure. The unregulated use of pornography in the male world, both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view, is indicated in many quarters as one of the elements that can interfere with a healthy gender education and with the elimination of gender stereotypes that, according to the rules of patriarchy, tend to keep the woman in a position of control and domination by the man within couple relationships, and above all with the predisposition to make the couple a place in which to exercise power instead of making it a relational place devoted to mutual support and cooperation. Sex education should therefore accompany – now more than ever – the developmental path of children and pre-adolescents and integrate with affective education components. Indeed, the transformation of many of the aspects addressed in this article and the evolution towards a new conception of masculinity must pass through a pathway that favours a new way of approaching, experiencing and living the experience of love. Bell Hooks (2022a) discusses this at length, stating 'there are introductory courses in any dimension of sexuality, even masturbation. But there are no schools of love. It is taken for granted that everyone knows instinctively how to love'. And it is Hooks herself who in her book aimed at men (*The Will to Change*) quotes a brief comment by Dean Ornish (1999) who says: 'I am learning that the key to our survival is love. When we love someone and feel loved, somehow over time our suffering subsides, our deepest wounds begin to heal, our hearts begin to feel safe enough to be vulnerable and open a little more. We begin to experience our emotions and the feelings of those around us'. This is probably the direction that can contribute to the foundation of a new male gender culture today, one that will enable future men to become real men. And it is a direction that needs to be taken by men who are fathers and who are raising future generations of males who will be the true witnesses of a radical and profound revolution within the society of tomorrow.

The experience of fatherhood as a place of possible change

Providing gender education starting from pre-school means today carrying out a very important project - in support of boys and girls and of society as a whole. This education is necessary and the first to believe in it must be the educating community in which the alliance between family and school is strategic and fundamental to achieve that revolution that will lead to the demolition of gender stereotypes and that will also allow boys to have full access to a shared idea of masculinity that favours adherence to the model of the real man. Proposing to boys and girls, from the earliest age, educational pathways to talk about and explore the theme of gender difference is the basis for allowing every future man and woman to fully live their lives and realise their life project without conditionings and limitations. For this to happen, it also becomes necessary to promote actions to support parenthood, especially paternal parenting, so that a generation of new fathers is able to become both witness and promoter of a radical change capable of 'contaminating' the vision of masculinity both within the adult community and in the caregiving and educational relationship with those in their developmental years. It should not be overlooked that tenderness is one of the greatest discoveries that men make when they become fathers (Pellai, 2020). It is a transformative experience that does not have cultural but neurobiological roots. Neuroscientific research (Berg *et al.*, 2001, Abraham *et al.*, 2014, Atzil *et al.*, 2012) has revealed that the new father who lives in contact with his baby in the weeks following birth undergoes profound transformations in his own hormone structure. Indeed, the neurobiochemistry of paternity involves a reduction in the concentration of testosterone in the paternal blood, at the expense of an increase in the concentration of oxytocin and prolactin. It is as if the newborn teaches his father to reduce the functions associated with the presence of testosterone (seeking sexual contact, muscular power) and directs him towards the territory of building intimacy and tenderness, two characteristics which are strongly encouraged by oxytocin and prolactin; the latter are indeed defined as attachment hormones which favour the experimentation of intimacy and emotional harmony. In some way, we might say that in experiencing fatherhood, the new father is supported by intrapsychic transformations which bring about precisely that transition much sought after in the rationale of this article, from 'real man' to 'really a man'. An illuminating example, in this sense, is present in a scene at the beginning of Charlie Chaplin's film 'The Kid'.

In the film we see the path through which Charlie Chaplin becomes the father of an abandoned newborn baby, whom he finds one day while walking along the street, wrapped in light swaddling. At first Chaplin holds the bundle in his hands as he would hold any object. He doesn't know whose baby it is and is also unaware that it has been abandoned. So he tries to return it to

someone who he assumes has lost it. He tries to hand it over to a mother who already has a baby in a pram (imagining they might be twins). But she gives it back to him because she is not its mother. He then tries to hand it over to the police. But even in this case he is made to understand that he must shoulder his responsibilities as a father. Finally, he makes various clumsy moves to get rid of it (including a failed attempt to place it inside a manhole): but that child is there for him, even if he doesn't want it. He understands this, almost by chance, when he rummages through the clothes in which the newborn is swaddled and finds a note that says: «Take care of this baby. He's an orphan.» And here Chaplin shows us a man who, for the first time, tenderly picks up that child – treated like a bundle until a few seconds ago – and holds him up before his eyes. One look is sufficient and everything changes. The music accompanying the scene introduces an all-encompassing sweetness, the future father's gaze softens and smiles, filled with light. A father has been born, one might say. And it is precisely that looking into the baby's eyes that allows Chaplin to feel that he is the father, to all intents and purposes, of the child that has come into his life. The tenderness that pervades this scene is the same tenderness that should pervade the lives of men when they approach their own territory of fatherhood. There is the possibility of living an experience which can act as an incubator for the birth of the individual which every man should sooner or later encounter in his journey through life: the real man.

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