

## **A section from Chapter 1: Why It's So Hard for Men to Deal with Trauma**

*"We feel we are weak, cowardly or over-emotional  
if we don't keep our emotions under control. Men can't cry."*

- Mike Lew, *Victims No Longer*

### **The Devastating Cost of "Manning Up"**

"You gotta man up!" As boys and men, we hear this expression or some variation of it all the time.

"You're not really hurt; you've just got to man up and keep going."

"No time to worry about that, just man up and deal."

Manning up, sucking it up, or any way you name it is the opposite of asking for help. It's part of the code of being a man that most of us are trained to follow from the time we are boys.

You just endure all the tough stuff that happens to you, whether it's the pain of being hit by your father at home or by the bully on the playground or school bus. Or getting hurt on the football field. Or living in a home where the adults abandon or neglect you, or shame and ridicule you all the time, or numb out with alcohol or drugs.

Manning up means never acknowledging any pain, which may explain why men don't get health problems checked out, often until real damage has been done. I can't bend my fingers all the way today because when I was playing basketball as a teenager, I didn't do the rehab exercises to heal them—I was in too much of a hurry to get back out on the court.

Manning up means not being weak. Manning up means denying your needs. Manning up means doing it all by yourself. Manning up means doing what you're supposed to do to conform to the way boys and men are supposed to think and act.

Manning up also means getting as many girls as you can. When I was playing sports in high school, I remember sitting around with the jocks on Monday mornings listening to guys bragging about the girls they "got something from" over the weekend. They used to pitch me crap if I didn't share my exploits from the weekend.

We live in a culture that may be changing in some ways when it comes to gender roles, but it's slow to change in other ways. Many of us grew up in places where rigid definitions of what it means to be a boy or a man still rule the land. I'll tell you what I was taught about being a man, and you can see how that compares to your own training. From my dad and the men and boys around me, I learned that being a man meant something like this:

Be tough. Be strong. Be aggressive. Be stoic. Never, ever cry (except after losing a big game in sports, the rare exception to this rule that boys and men are granted!) Be responsible. Be a provider. Make as much money as you can. Work harder than the guys around you. Be the best. Win. Get as much sex as you can from as many girls and women as possible because, as my dad would say, "Once you get married, you only get it one way."

Not long ago I watched the documentary *The Mask You Live In*, and I found myself nodding my head at other definitions that males in the movie were taught to live by:

- Never admit it when you're sad.
- Dominate the people around you.
- Get bigger and faster than the other guys.

- Don't talk about your feelings to anyone.
- When you can't work out a problem or disagreement with someone, just pretend

there's no conflict. Or deal with it through violence.

That last message may partly explain the high rate of murders and assaults committed by men. For many males, the one emotion they are allowed to express is anger. All the other emotions, especially the more vulnerable feelings like sadness or fear, are off the table.

Men will tell you that feelings just get in the way of thinking anyway. And we should be able to think our way through any difficult feeling that might be creeping up, right?

### **Deny, Pretend, Delay**

So, if you believe you must stick to these kinds of definitions of being a man, you learn how to hide what you feel. You don't talk about your feelings to other people, whether they are adults who might be able to do something about you carrying those feelings or other boys who would mock you for having them. You sure don't *show* those feelings to anyone, in any way, at any time. You just put on the mask of being cool, of being in control, of being unaffected by stuff that makes other people feel all kinds of feelings. You keep your head down. You don't stop and look behind you, and whenever anybody asks you how you are, you are quick to proclaim, "I'm good."

You can't show vulnerability because that would make you look weak or insecure. You would leave yourself wide open to being called all kinds of damaging, hurtful names. I spend a lot of time talking to men transitioning to life out of prison, encouraging them to get help for the wounds left by their traumas so they don't wind up back in jail, and I hear over and over from them that showing any sign of weakness in prison can literally get you killed.

If you buy into these definitions of being a man and you suffer trauma, you're in a bind. You hear those voices telling you that you're not supposed to have feelings, you can't be vulnerable, you should be in control, you need to man up. Then you do what far too many men do, at least at first, after they have been knocked down by one of those trauma buses:

- **You deny.**

"Nothing really happened." "That didn't affect me." "That was so long ago, it doesn't matter now."

- **You minimize.**

"The abuse only went on for a while." "Maybe I just dreamed it." "I got hit, but I never had to go to the hospital." "I didn't want my mom to die from cancer, but that's just the way things go."

- **You pretend.**

"That's wasn't abuse, it was just messing around." "I'm not shell-shocked, I just can't sleep sometimes." "Sure, I got totally screwed in divorce court, but I've got a new girlfriend now."

- **You delay.**

"Maybe I should ask somebody about why I feel so depressed all the time, but I'm too busy with work stuff." "I can't talk about when I was sexually abused as a kid until I get old enough to understand all that psychological stuff." "It hurt when my business went under and my wife left me, but I've got to focus on building up the next business right now."

Sometimes men just rationalize away the problems left behind by unresolved trauma, or choose some way to avoid dealing with it. We say, “Yeah, that sucks, but it’s time to get back to that work project.” We power through. We keep on pushing. But we feel so isolated, so alone.

We often try to outrun the pain and shame by throwing ourselves into the quest for success through wealth, fame, prestige or reputation. Yet as hard as we try to outrun it, we’re going to face the day when the pain, shame and other effects of not dealing with trauma catch up to us.

We’ve been looking at why it’s so hard for us as men to deal with trauma. Now we need to bring in the wider consequences of not dealing with trauma and loss. As we’ve mentioned, men with unresolved trauma often wind up addicted to alcohol or drugs, or they stumble into one of those non-physical addictions to things like porn, or work, or food, or gambling or gaming. After I finally made the decision to deal with my trauma, I discovered three addictions of my own, which I’ll tell you more about later. Basically, I grabbed whatever I could to numb myself from the pain and avoid facing what was really making me suffer.

**Insight for Loved Ones: The addictions that mask our trauma can be incredibly damaging to those who love us. As one example, I’ve spent time with many partners suffering the devastating effects of pornography addiction on relationships.**

Men carrying the burden of unresolved trauma are also more likely to become sad or depressed, to find themselves failing at work and in relationships, to experience low self-esteem, to act out their anger in violent or manipulative acts. Some traumas leave behind a trail of nightmares, flashbacks or a high level of fear and anxiety. Or they lead to compulsive

behavior, or extreme distrust of people and life. Even for survivors of trauma who do become “successful” as measured by money or title, from the inside their lives still suck.

**Understanding Trauma Reminder: According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. If you have any symptoms related to depression, share them with a medical professional, even if you don’t believe they are linked to trauma.**

Men struggling with all these kinds of symptoms usually don’t connect their problems with trauma. That discovery comes much later, after the choice to pursue healing—to get help.