

# Socialization & Its Impact On Male Survivors Of Sexual Abuse

Jim Struve, LCSW

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Many people ask the question: "Does sexual abuse effect males differently than females?" Research and clinical experience indicates that the actual trauma experience that accompanies sexual abuse is predominantly the same for males as for females. Therefore, much of the existing literature about the dynamics of trauma for female sexual abuse survivors is applicable to males.

One of the primary factors that distinguishes male from female survivors, however, is the different ways people (including the male survivor himself) respond to male victimization as compared to female victimization. In other words, how males cope with their experience of sexual abuse as well as how the larger society responds to the abuse of males is significantly different than when the victim is female.

Much of this difference in response patterns reflects the contrasting ways in which our culture views gender divisions. The cultural norms of masculinity create quite a different context within which to deal with sexual abuse than is the case with the norms of femininity. Although there remains much debate about whether gender roles are inherently biological or are the result of socialization, I believe that gender is largely influenced by social learning. Therefore, the material in this presentation reflects this bias.

As a result of traditional gender socialization, we have become conditioned to view females as being at greater risk for victimization in general. Unfortunately, we seem comfortable with paradigms that view females as being at high risk for assault, abuse, and/or discrimination. We are less familiar -- and probably less comfortable -- incorporating into our worldview the reality that males are also potential victims, such as in the case of sexual abuse.

However, it is true that males are sexually abused, too. We must move beyond our collective stance of denial and minimization in order to address the true magnitude of this problem. This requires that we examine the relationship of how gender socialization impacts our efforts to respond to the sexual abuse of males.

A number of feminist writers (Lerner, 1986; Bleier, 1984; Figs, 1986) advocate that the ritual of dividing males and females into two distinct categories is a supremely political deed: an artificial system of norms designed to protect patriarchy. It is helpful to identify the ways in which expectations for masculinity

and femininity differ within the context of our current-day patriarchal culture. Let's begin by looking at what it means to be male or female within most contemporary western patriarchal cultures such as the United States. There are certain traits that are characteristically attributed to "masculine" and "feminine."

The following list compares the norms stereotypically assigned to these gender divisions:

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### **COMMON GENDER TRAITS ASSIGNED WITHIN WESTERN PATRIARCHAL CULTURES**

Male	Female
Logical & rational	Illogical & irrational
Knowledgeable/Objective	Intuitive/Subjective
Reasonable	Hysterical
Strong/Powerful	Weak/Frail
Emotionally obscure	Emotionally vulnerable
Dominant	Castrating
Mature/Adult-like	Immature/Child-like
Autonomous/Independent	Needy/Dependent
Leader	Follower
Active	Passive
Able to overcome obstacles	Thwarted by obstacles
Competitive	Non-competitive
Goal-directed/productive	Process-oriented/less productive
Requesting help = unmanly	Requesting help = being a woman
Denial of fear	Acceptance of fear

Dignity in the face of tragedy      Strain/weariness in face of  
tragedy

The cumulative effect of these norms is to socialize boy children to become masculine adult men and girl children to become feminine adult women. It is as though we are given a set of clothing to wear as we grow up and the expectation is for us to both accept and be comfortable with our assigned "costume" of masculine or feminine.

Unfortunately, within our culture there exists an underlying premise for boys and men that it is O.K. for males to act on feelings but dangerous to express feelings: males should have the capacity to "rise above" feelings & "move beyond" adversities. This is a particularly important factor that influences how a male will respond if he encounters a traumatic experience such as sexual victimization. In fact, this cultural expectation actually creates a kind of global "double bind" in which the concept of "male" and "victimization" exist as oxymorons. Within such an environment, it is extremely difficult for males to step forward and seek to address very personal issues related to experiences of sexual victimization.

Furthermore, the norms of the dominant culture are also much more permissive in sanctioning male use of force & violence. For example, the attitude of many males who subscribe to traditional values regarding gender distinctions reflect a sense of permissiveness that they are willing to engage in some forms of rape behavior if only they can be assured they will not be caught & punished. Ironically, this fosters an attitude that holds the victim accountable for her or his own victimization. Within this kind of cultural context, many males are inclined to accept responsibility for their own abuse. At a minimum, most men believe they should have been capable of preventing their victimization and they are inclined to interpret any failure to stop their abuse as implying complicity. This attitude frequently persists for males no matter how young they were when their abuse occurred.

When males do seek treatment to resolve the wounds from their abuse, a considerable amount of time and energy will no doubt be focused on unraveling the impact of the socialization process. Defining the typical messages that males receive during their socialization experiences may help to clarify some of the issues that may arise for a male survivor as he engages in the process of his treatment and recovery.

Following is an elaboration of the significant socialization messages that men receive as they are socialized to be traditional masculine males within our culture. Each message is followed by a brief summary of the "typical" male response to this messages as it may emerge during the process of therapy.

***Males are aggressive by birth.***

Many males may be susceptible to volatile/unpredictable behaviors when the armor protecting feelings begins to crack. Some males may respond to feelings of vulnerability by exhibiting increased aggression.

***Males are strong/tough in the face of adversity.***

Perceived vulnerability pushes many males into isolation, as a strategy for self-protection. Therefore, some men will gravitate toward isolation to maintain an image of control. Some males are inclined to "compartmentalize" their feelings or to gravitate towards intellectualizing emotional responses, in order to give the appearance of being in control. However, this kind of behavior frequently reflects an underlying desire to regain control of what seems like an out-of-control experience.

***Males who express feelings openly are weak, unstable, & unreliable.***

Many people judge that males who express feelings openly are weak, unstable, & unreliable. Essentially, the "sensitive male" is an oxymoron for many people. Some men severely restrict their expression of emotions in their effort to comply with real or perceived social norms for "permissible" male behavior. There is a tendency for many men to have internal and private experiences that are in radical contrast to the external demeanor they display. Therefore, therapists and friends of the male survivor must be aware that what you see is not always what you have.

***Males are logical, decisive, & action-oriented; feelings are disruptive, tangential, & will make a person less productive (= less successful).***

As a result of existing socialization patterns, males learn to think their way through their life. Males are taught that feelings are disruptive to efficiency and, therefore, they learn strategies for "numbing" or tuning out emotions. By the time most males reach adulthood, they have probably lost the ability even to identify feelings. Consequently, a first step in the therapy process for many male survivors may need to focus on establishing a feelings vocabulary and learning the skills to identify feelings. For some male survivors, therapy will be experienced as a very intrusive undertaking and there may be a resulting fear of therapy or of the therapist.

***Feelings are never clear; they are usually ambiguous & amorphous; the social order (which requires that decisions be based on black & white information) would collapse if everybody operated on feelings; somebody has to keep thinking clearly.***

In general, males learn to value the importance of solutions. Therefore, most male survivors will focus considerable energy on their desire to gather information, to understand, to have answers, to complete tasks. Inevitably, the male survivor will be confronted with the ambiguities and uncertainties that surround issues related to his abuse. There may be a propensity to interpret partial answers, "grey" areas, or ambiguities as failures. Difficulties in tolerating anything less than absolute answers may push the male survivor to become hypercritical of himself and/or others who try to help him -e.g., therapist &/or other group members.

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***Feelings imply conflict.***

Many males have great difficulty distinguishing specific emotional energies and, consequently, the presence of any kind of emotional energy is frequently experienced as a statement of conflict. As a result, men will often perceive emotional work as disruptive or counterproductive. They may try to redirect interchanges to facilitate the avoidance of feelings. Within this context, it can be predicted that many male survivors may be vulnerable to power struggles when therapy shifts from addressing tasks or solutions and seeks to focus on process-oriented activities.

***? Dealing with feelings is a luxury; men must be productive & don't have time to engage in a luxury such as expressing feelings.***

Many men learn to suppress their emotions and believe that dealing with feelings reflects a last-ditch effort to address a particular situation. Frequently, men acknowledge their feelings only when they perceive that things have gotten really bad. Consequently, males are vulnerable to psychosomatic disorders that actually reflect the physiological display of repressed feelings. For example, men tend to have a higher likelihood of stress-related illnesses such as heart attacks, & at a much younger age than women. Male survivors will need to overcome injunctions that inhibit their expression of feelings in order to allow them to incorporate emotions into their belief system.

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***Males lack the genetic predisposition to deal with feelings as effectively as females; women are able to take care of men around feelings.***

Many men accept the cultural norm that males lack the biological capacity to deal with emotion. Some male survivors are prone to expect other people (e.g., therapist, peers in group, friends, partner) to read his mind or to know about his inner world even in the absence of self-disclosures. It is common that a male will have high expectation of others internally while exhibiting an external presentation of having low expectations. Consequently, many men experience intense personal disappointment and/or anger when they perceive that people have let them down in their manner of response, even when they did not express what kind of response they desired.

Attending to the impact of socialization will be a significant factor in facilitating the healing and recovery process for most male survivors of sexual abuse. In fact, it will be difficult to adequately heal the wounds of male sexual victimization without addressing the accompanying dynamics of male socialization.

## REFERENCES

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