

Men and emotions

'In Western culture, men are taught to be the tough ones: They're not to cry, they're supposed to have the answers, be the providers, and above all it's not okay to show emotion...' (Participant 274, Easton, Saltzman & Willis, 2013).

One of the fundamental components of our society's idea of masculinity is in men's ability to be strong, in control, and emotionally contained. This concept of men and emotions is often grounded in the development of boys from an early age, and is strongly cemented by adulthood. These dominant ideas about masculinity can have significant impacts on the way in which men express and experience emotions, including in relation to childhood sexual abuse.

Gender expectations shape both men and women's lives. The differences between genders and emotions start early on in development, some of which include:

- Expression of emotions is often associated with being seen as weak, cowardly, or overemotional.
- The suppression of emotion is strongly associated with 'being a man', and with masculinity.
- Both men and women face limits on their expression of emotions, but in different ways.
- Learning what are considered acceptable emotions for men and women to have and express begins in early childhood, and is shaped throughout adolescence and into adult life.
- Women generally acknowledge and express more directly certain feelings, such as fear or sadness, but are taught to dampen or avoid others, such as anger (Briere & Scott, 2006).
- Men are taught to be in control, to limit and hide emotions (particularly emotions related to vulnerability), and learn to externalise or to act on the environment as a means to manage and reduce emotional pain or distress (Briere & Scott, 2006).
- The limitations imposed on emotional expression and understanding often leave men with an inner turmoil that they feel they are unable to relate to, describe, or express.
- Boys learn to repress certain emotions, to avoid the stigma of appearing weak and 'feminine'.
- The expectation that men should be in control of their emotions means that, when intense emotions do appear, this can add to men's feelings of distress, uncertainty, disempowerment, sense of being out of control, and failure as a man.
- Men's efforts to live up to the stoic men's code can result in men suppressing, denying, avoiding, ignoring, or numbing from emotions (resulting in negative mental health outcomes). It can produce a pressure cooker effect, where the more men try to control and keep a lid on emotions, the more they feel out of control.
- The gender expectations around emotions shape men's understanding of self. If men are struggling with emotions, this can lead them to judging themselves, and seeing themselves as a failure and 'less of a man' for not being able to contain and manage emotions.