

Why Young Men Are Suffering And What We Can Do About It.

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The statistics on teens are sobering. Studies indicate that one in five has some sort of mental or behavioral problem, and that one in ten may have a serious emotional problem. What is happening in our families and culture that fosters this alarming situation?

Many parents bringing their adolescent sons into treatment are confused by the dramatic shift in their son's behavior, often after a normal, happy childhood. The parents usually continue to care for their adolescent sons by the same methods they used when they were boys; supplying every possible emotional solution and material need. These young men have never learned how to delay gratification, deal with frustration, or acquire their own resources. This is exacerbated by our increasingly technological culture that supplies and values instant gratification.

Recent neurological research has shown that puberty triggers massive frontal cortex development in adolescents. This engenders dramatic mood shifts, impulsive decision-making, as well as increased learning potential. Additionally, there are intense drives to individuate from parents, create new self-identity and experience altered states. Without healthy opportunities to experience and express this shifting of consciousness, teens will often create dysfunctional relationships with drugs, sex, music, video games, or any activity that can become addictive.

A parent's best intentions do not give their son opportunities to honor his biological urge to go out into the world and resolve life's challenges. The additional frustration of having few culturally sanctioned outlets to freely express their energy causes them to increasingly withdraw and/or act-out. They want to respect their parents but are hardened by the intuition that they are not being properly guided through this turbulent hormonal storm.

The problem is that we have not given young men what they need to be at peace with themselves and the world around them. For thousands of years a young man's primary purpose was clear; to make the community safe and secure. Societal reverence for this inherent role was a powerful source of identity, self-esteem and direction for young men. Without the training and respect of the community for acting in this gallant, protective capacity, young men are now apathetic and confused.

There is a critical absence of ways and means with which to usher young men and women into adulthood in our society. All traditional cultures have rites of passage initiation rituals and mentoring to foster the proper development of adolescents. These time-honored activities fulfill the most fundamental need of

a young man; to know his rightful place in the universe and his community. Through this realization a young man knows that he is a unique and special creation who is responsible for the wellbeing of his community.

Therapy based on traditional mentoring/initiation models teaches young men how to let go of their boyhood attitudes and inspires them to find their unique voice. When the therapist/mentor lets the young men voice their fears about adulthood without judgement, everyone begins to trust each other as they see their concerns are universal. The therapist/mentor respects the young men by holding the view that they are not broken and do not need to be fixed.

Young men are generally resistant to talk therapy. The efficacy of the initiation model is maximized by the fact that it is experiential. It has many attributes that are attractive to young men such as: nature, activity, honor, masculinity and mystery. Crucial personal growth, self knowledge and confidence are gained as they successfully overcome the specifically designed physical and emotional challenges of the initiation. They directly experience having the necessary innate intelligence to find their way in life. They also discover that by working in teams they are able to accomplish much more than they would on their own.

Another vital aspect of this process is that the young men are surrounded by adult men who display high moral and behavioral standards. They quickly learn that these men will not negotiate agreed upon communal principles. They then begin to emulate the virtues being modeled. By the end of the process, the young men learn that they want the same things as all men; freedom of expression, fraternity, and recognition. And most importantly, they know that it is by respecting themselves and others that these freedoms are ensured.

Mentors are the catalysts that have been used throughout history to teach and model the codes of conduct that promote family and community cooperation. A qualified mentor is any responsible same sex adult of the community who has the ability and dedication to pass on the initiatory knowledge that they have received. It is our experience that when such adults resume leading in the right direction, our young men enthusiastically join them!

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