



The Harmful Effects of Restrictive Masculinity

Restrictive masculinity is the idea that men should be “manly” and tough. Somewhat different from toxic masculinity, restrictive masculinity refers to the societal expectation that men should suppress their emotions and behave in a stereotypically masculine way. Restrictive masculinity creates an environment where men are less likely to ask for help, which can lead to isolation and mental health issues. Restrictive masculinity is harmful to people of all genders, including men (3). This resource will discuss the negative effects of restrictive masculinity, and ways it can be prevented.

GENDER & MASCULINITY

Historically, men have had more opportunity, power, and privilege than women*. Though this inequality has changed throughout the years, women are still mistreated due to the historical and false narrative that men are smarter, more dominant, and stronger. These ideals are most harmful to women, but they also have negative impacts on men as well (3).

The “Man Box” refers to the seven pillars of how men are expected to behave. These pillars include, self-sufficiency, acting tough, physical attractiveness, rigid masculine gender roles, heterosexuality and homophobia, hypersexuality, and aggression and control (3). Research shows that most men don’t agree with stereotypes linked to masculinity, but go along with the expected behaviors to better align with other men (1).

DIGITAL LITERACY

In the modern era, many men/boys receive messaging about restrictive masculinity in online spaces. Because men/boys are spending a lot of time online, it is important to understand how male influencers are affecting norms and behaviors. Research shows that dating advice, fitness, and finance are the most searched terms for men/boys. However, many men/boys end up entering online spaces that are misogynistic (the hatred and discrimination of women) and anti-feminist. A study by Vodafone in 2024 found that 69% of boys ages 11-14 have been exposed to misogynistic content online, and most boys did not seek out this content (5).

A common idea in male-centered online spaces is that men are becoming oppressed and that women and girls are to blame. There’s been an increasing amount of anti-feminism in male-centered online spaces, as many men consider women the driving forces of the supposed “sexual marketplace,” and blame feminism for encouraging women to have the right to sexual agency and bodily autonomy (5). Many online forums are dedicated to the reversal of gender equity and the most severe tactics include committing acts of violence against women. Not all online threats translate into real-life violence, but frequent and unchecked online threats make it more likely for violence to occur (2).

*Women: May include those who identify as women and those who were assigned female at birth/socialized as women.

MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

According to a 2023 Equimundo report, two-thirds of young men ages 18-23 do not feel that others truly know them (1). In addition, a 2018 American Psychological Association study found that restrictive masculine men had increased frequency of hostile behaviors, and ultimately experiences of depression (4). When men are taught the only emotion they should express is anger, they often repress vulnerable emotions such as sadness and are less likely to ask for help in times of crisis. Among gay men specifically, adhering to restrictive masculine norms has been linked to higher rates of internalized homophobia. Men in the LGBTQ+ community have reported concealing parts of themselves to appear more masculine to their peers (3). Restrictive masculinity is an ideology that harms everyone.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

We now know that most men support having a fuller range of emotions and behaviors. But societally, many men/boys are becoming influenced by others online, often with the goal of selling men things to become more "manly." There are many things that we can do to support men:

For Parents:

- Restrictive masculinity is a generational issue. Many men/boys are introduced to these behaviors by family members. Parents can unlearn harmful parenting techniques, such as physical punishment and humiliation.
- Parents can learn the importance of teaching kids to regulate their emotions, so that anger is not met with violence.
- Parents can teach their children how to consume media with a critical eye. Consider providing alternate content.

For Men/Boys:

- If you witness another man/boy displaying problematic behaviors, call it out. Sometimes men respond best to their peers. Visit nextgenmen.ca for more information.
- If you see a man hurting, check in with him. Create space for other men in your life to express their feelings. Ask open-ended questions.
- If you find yourself participating in restrictive masculinity, consider getting support. Counseling or talking with a friend can be useful tools.

For Advocates:

- Promote healthy relationships free of violence and abuse. Advocate for relationships based on respect and equity.
- Create social norms change campaigns to change social constructs around masculinity.
- When encountering harm-doers, apply restorative practices to limit further harm.

SOURCES

1. Healthy Masculinity, Princeton University (2025).
2. Incels, Violence, and Masculinity, City University of New York (2023).
3. Measuring Restrictive Masculinity: Development and Implementation Within University Students, MDPI (2025).
4. Social Media, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression, American Psychological Association (2019).
5. What is the Manosphere?, Equimundo (2024).