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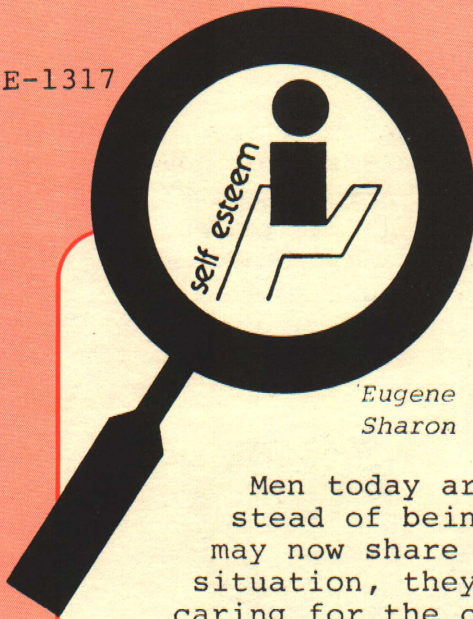
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Self-Esteem & You – Men Today and Self-Esteem
Michigan State University Extension Service
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Self-Esteem & You



III. MEN TODAY AND SELF-ESTEEM

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Men today are many things they were not in the past. Instead of being the only breadwinners in the family, they may now share that role with their wives. As a result of that situation, they may also have a larger role in family life, in caring for the children and the home.

Behind such changes in the lives of men today is a general questioning of the standards society has set for men in the past. Have the standards of masculinity been unrealistic and have they in fact been harmful? These are some of the questions we'll be considering here, by looking at the "ideal" and noting some of its shortcomings. The idea is to become aware of certain standards society sets for men that are harmful to them -- that limit their growth by restricting the ways they can realize their value as male human beings.

The "Ideal Man" --

The Phantom We Pursue

Just what is a "real" man supposed to be in this society? Marc Feigen Fasteau, in his book The Male Machine, offers some insights. Fasteau explains that the masculine ideal, or the "male machine," as he calls it, is not a real person. Rather, it is a stereotype that is shared, with few variations, by nearly all American men.

Fasteau sees the masculine ideal as the yardstick against which males measure themselves as men. He notes that, "To the extent that we fail to meet its injunctions, even by deliberate choice, we are likely to see ourselves, at least at times, as inadequate." In describing the masculine ideal, Fasteau says:

"The male machine is a special "He dominates and outperforms



kind of being, different from women, children, and men who don't measure up. He is functional, designed mainly for work. He is programmed to tackle jobs, override obstacles, attack problems, overcome difficulties, and always seize the offensive.

"He will take on any task that can be presented to him in a competitive framework, and his most important positive reinforcement is victory. He has armor plating which is virtually impregnable. His circuits are never scrambled or overrun by irrelevant personal signals.

his fellows, although without excessive flashing of lights or clashing of gears. His relationship with other male machines is one of respect but not intimacy; it is difficult for him to connect his internal circuits to those of others. In fact, his internal circuitry is something of a mystery to him and is maintained primarily by humans of the opposite sex."

The Breakdown of the Ideal

Today the masculine ideal is being attacked on a practical level, as well as theoretically. Some of the changes are being forced by simple economics. For example, men often are no longer the sole financial providers of the family.

With more women working just to make ends meet -- nearly half of the 38 million women in the labor force in 1976 were there because of pressing economic need -- the major base of many men's feelings of self-worth has been shoved from under them. And the fact that inflation, not their own inadequacy, has created this situation is often difficult for men to understand.

Mothering Becomes Parenting

With more women working outside the home, men have been required to spend more time in the home, especially when children are involved. But while siring children was one matter, many men have found that nurturing them is quite another.

According to Henry Biller and Dennis Meredith in Father Power, men suffer from a too-narrow idea of what fathering is. The

authors say that men are expected to show love for their children by protecting them from outside dangers and by providing for them financially. Nurturance -- affectionate care and attention -- "has been an undervalued facet of masculinity in our society," the authors maintain.



As a result, men are faced with a range of behavior that restricts their ability to help their children grow.

Simply spending time with their children can be considered excessive when fathers do it at the expense of furthering their careers, Fasteau notes. "Any man who not only says that he wishes he could spend more time with his children, but actually does so is suspected by his associates of not being properly ambitious ... Part of the feeling that care of children is inappropriate as a strong commitment for men comes from the fact that it is a diversion from men's 'real' work ..."

Intimacy Restricted

The masculine ideal not only restricts men in displaying affection, but it also limits the

range of emotions men "should" feel. Since men "should" be invulnerable, according to the ideal, personal relationships -- which potentially could make them most vulnerable -- are controlled. As a result, Fasteau argues, men make themselves incompetent in relationships because they are afraid to give of themselves fully.

What may be even worse is that men are also restricted from intimacy with themselves. Writes Fasteau:

"The internal processes of the individual (male) actors, their feelings and relationships with others, are denied importance. There is no set of beliefs that allows men to value themselves without regard to the marketplace. Nothing to tell men that discovering their own passions, accepting them, rejoicing in them, meshing them as best they can with the world and living by them is a worthy end in itself, distinct although not separate from the judgment of the marketplace."



The Importance of Performance

While the masculine ideal restricts men in displaying affection and emotion, it encourages them to assert themselves sexually. Sexual performance is a major aspect of masculinity by which males measure their value as men.

But much is amiss with this self-defeating "performance ethic," as author Rollo May calls it in Love and Will:

"The more one must demonstrate his potency, the more he treats sexual intercourse -- the most intimate and personal of all acts -- as a performance to be judged by exterior requirements, the more he then views himself as a machine to be turned on, adjusted and steered, and the less feeling he has for either himself or his partner; and the less feeling, the more he loses genuine sexual appetite and ability."

The "Manly" Physique

In order to meet the demands of this "performance ethic," men must have appropriately "masculine" bodies. As Dr. Donald E. Hamachek notes in Encounters with the Self, "The cultural sex-role prescription for males in our society is relatively clear and is one which places a high value upon factors such as physical strength, coordination and athletic deftness ..."

Hamachek contends that the social pressure for men to be physically "masculine," and the degree of self-esteem associated with it, are greatest for men:

"How a person feels about himself is related to how he feels

about his body. The self-image is first and above all a body image ... These relationships (between body image and self-esteem) are more definite for boys, probably because we are clearer about what the physical criteria are for what a male should look like ... "

On Fulfilling Any Ideal

In Men: A Book for Women, James Wagenvoord and Peyton Bailey give some sensitive and funny insights into the male condition. In describing "the perfect man," the authors note:

"Ideally he'll be honest about his needs and open to yours. He will be ready to stop "performing," willing to discuss any problems he or you may have and able to accept the fact that he doesn't have all the answers just because he was born male. He will express and accept physical affection even when non-

sexual in intent ... He will not define masculinity with his sex organs. He will acknowledge -- even embrace -- the feminine side of his nature. He will be capable of displaying emotions openly ... He will always regard himself as a human being first, a man second."

In conclusion, the authors wisely add, "This, of course, describes an ideal that no man can fulfill."

And so, even the new ideas as to what a man should be are fraught with unattainable demands. What the new ideas tell us, however, is that masculinity need no longer be restricted to certain dictated behaviors. They expand the concept of masculinity to include all those roles which individual men may find appropriate for themselves.

Being a successful man need only mean being yourself, and liking it!

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