

Recognising the Importance of Gender

From the time we are born we receive instruction from our community about how we should be as boys and girls in the world.

We are taught a complex system of beliefs, attitudes, values and assumptions about what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman.

This system shapes the way we see the world, how I should act in relationship to myself, women and other men.

Fortunately, gender identity is flexible and there is not one definition of masculinity but multiple masculinities. In other words what it means to be a man in one community may vary from what it means to be a man in another community. Moreover a man may vary the expression his masculinity according to the circumstances he finds himself in.

While we acknowledge that there are many expressions of masculinity and femininity, research has shown that there are common values to be found across various expressions of masculinity. Within in Western cultures importance is placed on being rational, logical, independent, dominant, competitive, self-reliant, stoic, tough, competent, invulnerable, unemotional and successful, to name a few.

These values are good values.



However, when taken as a whole and placed within a rigid framework, call “optimal masculinity” that says there can be no deviation from this way of being, then research is beginning to show that there will be important physical and mental consequences. Some of these include:

- Greater levels of psychological distress when the image in my head doesn't match the reality of my behaviour or other's behaviour; in other words I or others act contrary to what is expected of my gender.



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- Unable or unwilling to express how I really feel, particularly if those feelings reveal any vulnerability, such hurt, sadness, shame, etc
- Unable or have difficulty being affectionate, emotionally close to or intimate with others – wife, partner, other women and other men
- Unable to find a good balance between commitment to work and commitment to family. There may be a tendency to overwork or be preoccupied with achievement and success
- Greater difficulty seeking help when needed.

In order to better manage our lives, it is important to grow in awareness of those conscious and unconscious influences that shape and mould us. Gender is one such influence.



This tip sheet was adapted from the work of Lilia Szarski BAMED (psych) Monash Reg Psych Vic./McIntosh J. Because it's for the kids – building a secure base after separation, Bambra Press, Melb./Family Court resources, www.familycourt.gov.au

The only service of its kind, Mensline Australia provides confidential telephone counselling, information and referral to specifically enable men to enhance their relationships and manage the challenges associated with disruptions to their family life or primary relationships.

Managed through Crisis Support Services Inc, Mensline Australia is a national service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Mensline Australia was established in September 2001 as part of the Commonwealth Government's Men and Family Relationships initiative. Since then, the service has been overwhelmed by calls from men around the country wanting to talk about their relationships.

1300 78 99 78
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is managed by Crisis Support Services