

# What Is The Man Box Culture?

By Dr. John Schinnerer

It was the second half of the varsity high school soccer game. The game was tied 1-1. Play had just been stopped by the referee - injury timeout. I was laying on the ground, writhing in pain after having just been elbowed in the temple by a guy five inches taller and 30 pounds heavier. I was helped off to the sideline and play resumed. While I was still clearing the cobwebs out of my head from the concussion I'd just received, my coach turned to me and said, "John, man up. We need you out there. Stop being a wuss." So I sucked it up and went back into the game. What else could I do? I was a casualty of the man box culture.

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Ask boys in middle school what it means to be a man, and you will get remarkably consistent answers:

Men yell at people. Men have no emotions. Men stand up for themselves. Men don't cry. Men don't make mistakes. Men know all about sex. Men take care of others. Men are loyal. Men provide for the family. Men push people around. Men can take it. Men are self-reliant. Men don't back down.

Men are described by middle school and high school males as invulnerable, aggressive, responsible, mean, tough, angry, successful, strong, in control, active, smart and dominant over women.

When men step out of the box, we get put back in the box (usually by other men) via physical intimidation or name-calling... sissy, gay, fag, wimp, pussy, bitch, baby, loser, nerd, girl, wuss, punk, mama's boy, geek and so on.

Men hate being embarrassed. As a result, they jump back in the man box in order to keep from being humiliated with such words. These words have not changed since I was a child 45 years ago.

So, growing up, when a boy shows too much fear, anxiety or sadness, someone will say something like, "Stop being such a pussy" or "Man up." And when a boy shows too

much joy, love, excitement or romanticism, someone will say, “Stop being such a fag” or “Don’t be a little bitch.” And we quickly learn to shut down those emotional parts of ourselves. As a result, we learn that the only safe emotions for us to display publicly are...

1. Stress (as stress is a badge of honor)
2. Lust (“I’d do her”) and the big one...
3. Anger

Nearly everything men feel gets funneled through these emotional lenses. But the biggest one for men is anger (i.e., irritation, frustration, annoyance, rage, impatience, etc.).

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Fifty years ago, a good husband might be described solely as a good provider. After all, marriage originally began as a largely financial arrangement. If the husband didn’t drink too much, and wasn’t verbally or physically abusive, so much the better.

Then, came the 1970s, the pill, female empowerment, and an increase in women entering the workforce. As a result, many women started earning their own money and needed men less for financial security. Women's’ expectations for marriage and husbands quickly changed over the next several decades. Now, on top of the need for a financial partnership, women wanted a husband who was a lifelong romantic partner particularly the skills of listening, empathy, support, communication, and emotional awareness.

Currently, the divorce rate hovers around 50%. And wives are initiating divorce 75% of the time. Why? The main reason I hear with my clients is that the wives can’t connect with their husbands. The job definition of husband changed dramatically over the past 50 years. And no one bothered to tell the men. What’s more, men have not been socialized to have these skills. Not only that, men have been socialized in the exact opposite direction. Growing up, men were mocked and teased if they experimented with these skills. Let me perfectly clear. This situation is not men’s fault. Let me repeat that...It is not our fault. However, it is our responsibility to adapt, grow and learn (but only if we are looking to be successful and happy in our relationships).

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It is said that masculinity is hard-earned and easily lost. Men work hard to prove themselves - over and over. There is a merciless drive in the man box culture to achieve and accomplish and win. The problem with this is that you are only as good as your last accomplishment. And no one can sustain 100% success across a lifetime. And when the inevitable failure crosses our path, depression often follows. Since we, as men, are not supposed to feel sadness, shame sets in - the belief that we are all bad. Of course, this isn't true. But that doesn't stop us from believing our inner critic.

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[Please note these are generalities and may not apply to all men.]

Because men are socialized not to feel and to be analytical problem solvers, we live in our heads. We try to be Mr. Spock from Star Trek - cold, analytical, rational. The problem? We get cut off from the possibility of being happy. Happiness isn't as much about thinking, as it is about feeling. If we are disconnected from our emotions, then we are necessarily cut off from happiness (and all other positive emotions).

Because men are largely relegated to anger as a signature emotion, it is easy to blame others for that which is our responsibility (our actions, our thoughts, our feelings). Anger cuts us off from growth. It locks us into a fixed mindset in which change is impossible. The motto of many men? Love me as I am. There is no need for me to change. Except that life is about growth. If you aren't growing, you are a step closer to the grave.

Many men lose their male friendships over the years. Thus, there is an epidemic of loneliness among men, loneliness which has been found to be more harmful than smoking or obesity. One in 8 adult men report having no one outside of the home with whom they can discuss serious topics. This puts more pressure on their spouse to meet all their needs.

Due to the competitiveness inherent in the man box culture, many men believe their highest values are wealth, fame, power, and/or sex. Yet, none of these graces us with happiness and contentment (at least, not for long). While there is nothing wrong with fame, wealth, power or sex, these pursuits don't lend themselves to happiness unless they are tied to a purpose larger than ourselves (e.g., serving others, volunteering, spirituality, etc.).

Most relationships don't end due to a large transgression such as an affair. Most relationships end far more subtly and slowly - the death by a thousand paper cuts. What are these paper cuts? An accumulation of slights, resentments, being ignored, put-downs and misunderstandings. Men's attitudes towards the world work in a similar way. As men accumulate hurts, slights and put-downs, the lens through which they see the world can become hostile, pessimistic and they can become mistrustful of people and of the world. Recently, a male client came into my office, sat down, and proclaimed, "All women are bitches!" He was single and dating and had become frustrated with the dating process. I asked how that attitude would serve him in the dating world. I told him he may as well not date if that was his mindset as he would look for and find the worst in any woman he dated.

What's more the skills men develop to survive in the man box culture, such as one-upmanship, insults, hyper-competitiveness, lack of emotionality, and channeling all other emotions through the anger lens, perfectly prepare us for mastering the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - John Gottman's four deadly harbingers of divorce. They are defensiveness (e.g., "It's not my fault. If only you had not done X, I wouldn't be so angry."), stonewalling (i.e., shutting down emotionally and withdrawing), criticizing and contempt (i.e., anger plus a judgment in which one partner knows better than the other). So, in some ways, we are taught growing up to excel at the skills that lead to divorce. Again, this is not our fault. It is simply our responsibility to find new ways of being and communicating.

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- Having a growth mindset: believe change is possible through effort and perseverance
  - Balancing your head with your heart
  - Being aware of and comfortable with all your emotions
  - Seeking connection and intimacy
  - Serving others while getting paid
  - Feeling anger yet behaving positively as a result of it
  - Taking absolute responsibility for your own actions, words, and emotions
  - Knowing that your worth goes well beyond a single event or achievement

- Practicing self-compassion to encourage greater resiliency and equanimity
- Getting more comfortable with failure as it is one of the most powerful ways to learn
- Being comfortable with all aspects of his psyche - masculine, feminine, rational, emotional, conscious, subconscious
- Being aware of your shadow side and working to accept and integrate it
- Being curious and accepting of all other people in the world
- Learning to be an expert at communicating through difficult and uncomfortable conversations

These are some of the ways we can begin to become experts in emotion, communication, and relationships. The payoff is tremendous - success AND happiness at home and at work. Isn't that what we are all striving for? For more information, visit [TheEvolvedCaveman.com](http://TheEvolvedCaveman.com), follow Dr. John on Instagram at [TheEvolvedCaveman](https://www.instagram.com/TheEvolvedCaveman), or listen to The Evolved Caveman Podcast wherever you find the top podcasts (Apple, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify, Alldio and more).

### **About Dr. John**

Dr. John Schinnerer coaches men to perform at their peak from the boardroom to the bedroom. Dr. John hosts a podcast to help men evolve, The Evolved Caveman. He graduated from U.C. Berkeley with a Ph.D. in educational psychology. He was an expert consultant for Pixar's Inside Out. He has spoken to organizations such as Stanford Medical School, Chinese entrepreneurs in Hebei, China, U.C. Berkeley, Kaiser Permanente, Sutter Health, Gap and UPS. He has been featured in national media such as U.S. News and World Report, Readers Digest, and SELF Magazine. Dr. John has worked with Army Rangers, Navy Seals, entrepreneurs, and executives from dozens of Fortune 500 companies. He wrote the award-winning book, "How Can I Be Happy?" His areas of expertise range from high performance, to stress management, to positive psychology, to anger management, to creating happy, thriving relationships. Over 10,000 people have taken his online anger management course. He recently recorded 2 mini-courses on anger management and forgiveness for Simple Habit; they have been listened to over 90,000 times in the first year. Visit [GuideToSelf.com](http://GuideToSelf.com), [TheUltimateRelationship.com](http://TheUltimateRelationship.com) or [TheEvolvedCaveman.com](http://TheEvolvedCaveman.com) to learn more about Dr. John.