

How Does Man Box Culture Affect Our Relationships as Men?

By Dr. John Schinnerer

I've been doing a deep dive into the Man Box phenomenon and learned a bit over the past 25 years. I've found that the way in which we are socialized as boys has a profound impact on how we behave, think and feel as men...years later. And this learning that has taken place is so deeply embedded in us, we don't even realize that it is there; that it creates masks we wear that adversely impact our relationships. These masks lead to isolation, loneliness, marital strife, divorce, drug and alcohol addiction, anger and violence and more. These masks prevent us from living a vital, authentic, successful and happy life. As a man, none of this is your fault. However, it is your responsibility to learn new tools to adapt and evolve.

What Are The Rules We Learn As Boys?

There are a variety of possible implications based on the unspoken rules we learn as boys. Some of these rules include "men don't feel", "men are invulnerable", "men should be self-reliant", "men are strong", "men win at all costs", "men should be dominant and aggressive", "men should know everything", and so on. While some of these are effective, some are problematic. And keep in mind, I am talking about how we are socialized (i.e., taught by society - media, coaches, parents, friends, and peers), so this is NOT your fault. You didn't ask to be socialized like this. It just happens. It is, however, your responsibility to learn new tools to improve upon this. Again, it is not your fault. It is your responsibility.

How Do We Learn These Rules?

Boys are socialized via insult. When boys show too much sadness or fear, someone will let them know it - "Dude, stop being a bitch," "Don't be such a pussy," or "Stop being a little girl." When boys show too much excitement, joy, love or flamboyance, they are reigned in - "Don't be a fag" or "Stop being gay." These insults start at the age of five and never let up. For boys that are smart, these lessons are learned quickly and early. The end result is that males can only show three emotions in public without fear of humiliation. These three are: 1) Stress, 2) Lust and 3) Anger. And most of our emotions get filtered through the anger lens (e.g., irritation, annoyance, frustration, and rage).

How Do Man Box Rules Affect Us As Men?

1. Because we aren't supposed to feel all our emotions, because we aren't taught to speak up for what we need we are more likely to have volcanic, angry outbursts.
2. Because we aren't encouraged to learn interpersonal and emotional IQ skills growing up, many of us struggle to stay connected with our spouses. And this leads to chronic feelings of disconnection, irritation, anger and arguments.
3. For a number of reasons, including difficulties in communication, listening, and empathy, our spouses get increasingly irritated with us.
4. We are socialized to be completely self-reliant. To an extent, this is great. America was built on the hard work and self-reliance of entrepreneurs. However, it becomes a problem when we struggle, get depressed, have addiction issues, and get isolated - and we are unable to reach out for help because we have learned well the lesson that "real men don't ask for help." Fuck that. We are human. We succeed. We fail. We love. We weep. We triumph and we struggle. We are human. We need help at times.
5. If we are cut off from emotions due to the Man Box lesson of "men shouldn't feel emotions", then we are cut off from real happiness. Happiness is an emotion. As a result of our socialization, men are left with 3 emotions that they may display publicly without fear of being mocked - lust, stress and anger. There is no room for happiness in this equation. So we attempt to succeed. Weekly. Daily. Hourly. We think if we can just keep winning, then we will be happy. However, what happens when you are unable to keep the winning streak alive? The only way out is through. We must learn to feel again. The emotions never left you. You left your emotions. Emotions are stronger, faster and pre-date thought. We are not thinking beings that feel. We are feeling beings that think. The only way out is to go through - to learn to feel again.
6. Financial success is hollow. I work with a lot of men who have achieved tremendous monetary success. Around the age of 50, they wake up to realize that money does not buy happiness. They have it all - everything - everything but happiness. We need to become aware that life is about so much more than materialism. It is about relationship to self, relationship to others, meaningful work, belief in something greater than self, and emotional literacy.

7. The Man Box Culture teachings cut us off from other men. We develop fewer deep male friendships as we are caught up in competition, in one-up-man-ship and wearing masks of invulnerability, sarcasm, affluence, inauthentic happiness and stoicism. We need to learn to share what is behind the masks - fear, insecurity, doubt, imperfection and struggle - if we want to develop authentic, meaningful relationships.

8. More irritability stemming from underlying depression. Anger (or some degree of it - irritation, annoyance, frustration) is one of the three emotions we can safely display in public. The more we sink into the depths of despair and disconnection due to blindly following the Man Box rules, the more irritable we become. And we aren't even aware that this is male depression. At this point, we need help, we need to talk to someone. All of us need help at some point in life. I give you permission to reach out.

9. Loss of authentic confidence. Masculinity is hard won and easily lost. When we experience a failure, a setback, being fired, getting divorced, losing a company, or retirement, we take it hard. Our confidence plummets. Real confidence is the awareness that you can learn what you need when you need to. It is based on the belief that you will make it through the inevitable struggles.

10. Inability to ask for help when things get tough. As mentioned before, we all need help, support and assistance at times. There is no shame in that. Asking for help is courageous, heroic and wise. Asking for help gives a gift to the receiving party - they get a positive emotional boost because they GET to help. It is the definition of a win-win situation. Both of you get what you need. Be a hero. Ask for help when you need it.

Becoming aware of these unspoken rules is the beginning of becoming free from them - working towards greater authenticity, happiness and deeper, more connected relationships.

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, TheUltimateRelationship.com or TheEvolvedCaveman.com to learn more about Dr. John.