

Role Models for Men

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Last article, I ended off by writing about how men generally do not have good role models for how to be a modern parent or husband. In this article we will explore this idea more. As I mentioned previously, the roles of most of our dads, and probably all of our grandfathers, were solely as providers. Most likely, they were not directly involved in the childcare all that much. Things have changed in the last 20-30 years. Men are now expected to share with the childcare/housework. This is not a complaint, just a statement of fact. With the vast majority of women out in the workforce, it is only fair that the chores be divided up. How each couple decides to divvy up the housework is up to them. However, my point is that the way our households are run is probably quite different than the way the households that we grew up in were run.

Again you maybe be asking why I am bothering to write about a man's changing role as husband and dad in an alternative health column. Our job as health care professionals is the health of our patients. I don't have to tell you that stress contributes massively to our health, or more accurately, our ill health. The main sources of stress in most people's lives are job, marriage and family. If you do any sort of basic counseling in your practice, you are going to run into someone who is having problems in their relationship. Knowing the source of this stress can greatly benefit you in helping your patients.

Much of this relationship stress is caused by problems with expectations, assumptions and communication. Assumptions and expectations are easier to manage if your role in the relationship is clear. Because most of us are less than expert at communicating in our relationships and our roles have changed so much in one generation, this is a big deal when it comes to problems in relationships.

There are lots of benefits to this change in roles. Now you are not stuck in a specific role just because of your gender. Women are not forced to be at home, and some men are choosing to stay at home and look after the kids. Still, positive or not, change is still change. We have been inventing something new for our society in these last decades. Dividing up the household/childcare more fairly is great. The disadvantage for this first generation of social pioneers is that we now have to figure out where we each fit in, what our roles are and what does it mean for us to be a man or a woman? In a few previous articles I explored how this change was affecting women. This time I will look at the men.

I want to re-iterate just how difficult it is to change these fundamental social roles. [Marshall McLuhan](#) (one of the pre-eminent social scientists of the 20th century) talked about this very same problem with societal change. He talked about how when the change gets too much to manage, society scratches this "itch" with war. When the pressures to change are too great bear, only through the destruction of war can societies create the new social order needed to integrate these new roles. In a sense, the devastation of war is what we need to open our hearts and minds enough to shake off our old thought patterns and expectations so that we can accept the change that is coming. McLuhan has been dead for 30 years, but unfortunately looking at the state of the world today his words still ring eerily true.

The above extreme example aside, change is hard to cope with for most of us. On a personal level, I am sure we can all relate to being overwhelmed with change. Whether the "overwhelmedness" is brought on by moving homes or losing a loved one, change can make us feel rootless and ungrounded. Consequently when we are overwhelmed with change, we make choices that we normally would not make. I believe men are especially susceptible to this change because we do not have the same communication skills and emotional awareness that women generally have. Of course I am stereotyping, and there are always exceptions to rules.

However, the stereotypes are present for a reason; there is truth held within them. Men generally are not that in touch with their inner emotional lives and are not good at communicating it when they do dare to glimpse in that forbidden territory. Men do not talk to vent but to solve problems. Consequently, when change happens in the fundamental roles they are expected to play, they not well equipped to deal with it.

I will give you an example of this change in roles. When I am at the grocery store alone with my 7-month-old son, almost every older lady in the store feels impels to come over and give me advice on how to parent properly. "Dear, is he warm enough, is he too warmly dressed, I think he might be tired, etc." This advice is kindly meant, but at its root is the assumption that I am in need of help. Another example is if I am changing one of my children's diapers in the car, these same older ladies come up to my wife and tell her what a good man I am for helping out in this way. Again, these women automatically assume that because I am a man with an infant I am out of my element and need help. This is because their husbands and probably sons would not have had a clue with how to care for an infant. It was not their role.

Of course, I do have a clue and so do most other fathers these days because things are different now. We clean the house, do the dishes, change poopy diapers, bathe the kids, put the kids to bed and vacuum. Not to mention that we are supposed to work for money, have a career, do "manly" housework like fixing things, be romantic, exercise, bring the kids to swimming lessons and fulfill ourselves personally. I wrote about these pressures for women previously, but men face them equally. It is tough being a man now. One such pressure that I want to zero in on some more is the romance bit. The idea of romantic love and soul mates has created a whole boatload of problems for relationships.

For me, like most men, listening means figuring out what the problem is and then trying to fix it. If I am talking to a male friend about problems with finishing a renovation, it's because I am wondering if he has any better ideas on how to do it. If my wife is talking about a problem she is having with a home renovation, she's not asking for help. What my wife wants, and what she means by "listening," is that she wants me to say, "That's horrible. I know exactly how you feel. It is awful that you can't get the drywall screws hidden properly." She wants me to be empathetic to her situation. She wants me to tell her that she is justified in feeling the way she does. She does not want me to tell her how to put plaster over drywall screws.

The real problem is not that men and women communicate differently. That has been happening for a long time. My grandmother would never go to my grandfather for venting on a problem that she was having. The issue now is that somehow the concept of "soul mate" has infused itself into our relationships. My experience is more limited here, but generally I find that most women are looking for that soul mate that will be her everything. Of course these problems of expectations in relationships are not limited to the last 30 years. That is a problem with any human relationship. My point is that

because our domestic roles have changed so dramatically, these unseen subconscious expectations have much more potential to cause problems, and that the expectation of being a soul mate is a massive cause of assumptions and, consequently, problems.

Hopefully I have helped illuminate some of the pressures that men as husbands and fathers face today and that it helps you understand and treat your male patients with more insight, humor and compassion. I believe that counseling is not only effective, but necessary if you want to help your patients get to the root of their health problems and have a chance to change their patterns in the long run. Looking at, and understanding, fundamental human relationships is key to being a good counselor. That and a good sense of humor.

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