



# Supressing vs. Expressing emotions

## *Vulnerability.*

This can be a scary topic for many. What does it even mean to be vulnerable?

Being vulnerable with others about what you're feeling does require taking a risk. You may not always get the response you desire, but that doesn't mean you can avoid it. Being honest in relationships and to yourself is necessary to have positive experiences, resolve conflicts well, and build intimacy. However, people might be hesitant to share their feelings



# Barriers men face to expressing their emotions

## 1. Prioritizing your loved ones

Many men feel that they cannot “waste” time dealing with their own emotions. Some may believe time is better used supporting those around them, while others may think that their problems would burden others and that they should be self-reliant. The fear of being a burden is understandable, and often comes from not believing that we, or our concerns, are worthy of other people’s precious time.

While it is a good thing to be considerate of other people’s energy, we all deserve to feel heard and supported. To help minimize the fear of being a burden, give your loved ones the opportunity to set healthy boundaries for when or how often you will confide in them.

## 2. Internalizing stereotypes and expectations of the ideal man

Many men try to avoid shame by being physically strong, appearing emotionally stable by not reacting or crying, being a good provider, and taking the role as the sexual initiator. However, men who constantly try and uphold these ideals are more likely to have lower relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and report being afraid of intimacy.

We may also look to the characters and media figures we look up to, which also shape the type of person we want to be. Especially in Western media, desirable men are often depicted as being fearless, resourceful, stoic, and facing adversity alone. Picture the strong, silent type. Consider what characters you’ve wanted to be like and how that may have affected how you think of yourself today.

## 3. Inexpressive male role models

It might be difficult to express your emotions if you were raised around men who never did so. Many men have grown up with fathers or family members who are emotionally distant and who rarely (if ever) cry or express affection outwardly.

From a young age, adults may use a narrower range of emotional vocabulary when talking to boys. Eventually, many boys internalize that the only intense emotion that is acceptable for men to express is anger.

# Consequences of suppressing emotions

It is helpful for us to learn to identify and cope with our emotions by communicating them to others in a variety of ways. However, using alternative coping strategies to deal with them is great too. This may involve some distraction, like physical and creative outlets, which allow you to relieve stress when you do not yet feel equipped to deal with the emotional stressors.

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress outside of our control or to reduce stress when we are temporarily overwhelmed or unable to deal with it directly. However, distraction can be harmful when used too frequently or when it hinders someone from processing their feelings for a long period of time.

## Acting out

Pent up negative emotions due to not expressing hurt or an inability to express affection may lead us to act out in more harmful ways. Many people attempt to avoid their feelings by drinking, using substances, having sex, playing video games, gambling, shopping, eating, etc.

Excessive amounts of any of these behaviours are classic indicators of “I don’t want to talk about it.” All of these behaviours are associated with some level of risk.

## Relational problems

Avoiding emotional conversations or overworking can hinder us from taking action on things within our control and result in us hurting others. Facing relationship difficulties often requires communication or active problem-solving, which can be emotionally tiring.

While pushing past the psychological barriers to facing your emotions in the present may seem like more trouble than it’s worth, if you consider the long-term consequences of not facing them, it may be better to put in the work now rather than later.

## Physical Consequences

Suppressing our emotions can also have physical consequences. By increasing our stress and pain, suppression can lead to poor cardiovascular health over time.

Additionally, some emotional avoidance methods like drugs, alcohol, over-eating, or risky sex can lead to health problems in the future.

# Strategies for expressing emotions



## **Write it down.**

Regardless of what you are trying to express, you can start by writing it down. Writing can be helpful for practicing how you'd like to express your feelings toward someone else or simply for sorting out what is going on within your own mind.

If you are unsure of how to express affection, writing down how you'd like to express it may help you gain confidence and clarity for how you'd like to act around them. You may not only write what you'd like to say, but the actions you want to take to express your affection.

## **Put aside the cultural script and tell them how you really are**

Typically, if someone asks you how you are, how do you respond?

*"Fine." "Good." "Doing all right."*

One way to be more vulnerable with those you care for is to be slightly more honest when someone asks how you are. Instead of "fine", you could share "You know, I've actually been struggling with physics lately," or "Awesome, I had a great chat with my housemate today."

Most of the time "how are you?" is a formality, meaning the person isn't looking for you to unload the stressors of your day. However, sharing something slightly more personal leaves an opening in the conversation for the other person to empathize, ask questions, or share their own struggles if they are comfortable. If they aren't interested in diving into that conversation with you at the moment, it provides them an opportunity to simply respond "Oh, sorry about that," and close the topic.

# Find out your love language

The Five Love Languages is a tool for understanding what forms of affection make us feel the most loved, and for discovering how we can make others feel loved.

You can care deeply for someone in your life and put in every effort to show them how you feel, but if you're not communicating in a way that resonates with them, they may not internalize it. Discovering your love languages may help communicate to loved ones what you need from them to feel cared for.

If you want to find out your top love languages, you can use the "Five Love Languages" tool and take the [Adult Quiz](#). Having others in your life also take the quiz may clarify how you can express your affection for them.



## The five love languages are:

### Words of affirmation:

Words carry meaning, and these folks find it meaningful to hear what others think and feel for them.

### Acts of service:

For some, actions speak louder than words. Having someone going out of their way to do something kind makes them feel special.

### Receiving gifts:

Knowing that someone wanted to surprise them with a gift makes these people feel loved.

### Quality time:

Others giving their time and attention to these people makes them feel loved.

### Physical touch:

This one, like the other languages, can come in different forms. Examples include hugging, holding hands, massages, etc.

## Find a conversation-friendly activity

It can be scary to ask a friend, “Want to call later and catch up?” One way to get around this feeling is to find an alternative reason to hang out that also provides the opportunity to chat. Some examples include:

- Hiking
- Studying together
- Shooting hoops
- Grabbing a drink
- Playing music together



There are certain activities which may be too engaging and prevent conversation from happening. It's best to consider your experience with the activity previously to decide whether it would be a good option if you're trying to start an honest conversation.

This strategy can be useful when you want to talk about something going on in your life and need someone else's opinion or just a listening ear, but you're nervous to ask for it.

## How can you support other men?

Model that it's okay to be vulnerable. Some men may need someone they trust to serve as an example for what vulnerability can look like. This doesn't have to be an intimidating task. Something as simple as telling a guy friend when you are having a bad day, if that's not something you typically do, can be important in starting conversations about your health and well-being.

## Reaching out

You may have friends who don't reach out for support because of the pressure they feel to not appear “weak”. This does not necessarily mean that they don't need support. Invite them out for an activity, accept support from them, and offer them support as well. You may have to take the first step.

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## Final Note

This is a learning process. All of us are in it together. Getting better at expressing your emotions is not about getting it right 100% of the time, so do not beat yourself up if you fall back into old habits sometimes.

You deserve to have strong relationships. You deserve to not fear reaching out for support from your loved ones. Fortunately, you can learn how to build these bonds yourself.

