



The loneliness of MEN



Being the “strong, silent
type” isn’t working anymore.
It’s time for men to open
up and start talking.

Words by David Leser
Collage by Nuno Moreira

DR ARNE RUBINSTEIN has seen the loneliness of men up close for more than two decades. During this time he has guided more than 30,000 fathers and sons through Rites of Passage programs around Australia and overseas to help boys make a healthier transition into manhood.

Not by getting into fights, bullying, driving fast, binge drinking or treating sex as a conquest but by learning to engage with their fathers and other men in honest and open ways, learning respect for elders and for mothers and women in general, and for their communities at large.

For Rubinstein, founding chief executive of the Pathways Foundation and best-selling author of *The Making of Men*, the process often starts with sons and fathers starting to listen in new ways.

“What I consistently find is that when we ask many of the fathers to tell their stories and to talk

about themselves, it is the first time they’ve ever done so,” he says. “Even today it’s not the normal thing for men to actually share with each other because they still have this tendency to see their emotions as a sign of weakness.”

“It’s different for my two sons, but I’m 52 and in my generation the main thing was about being tough, not having any problems, having it all together, being able to cope ... some deep belief that if we showed our emotions other men would see us as weak,” Rubinstein explains. “And yet what we actually find is the total opposite – that when men share their vulnerabilities it’s both an enormous release for them personally and they actually gain respect from the other men.”

The stories these men communicate to sons – and each other – through Rubinstein’s programs are often as remarkable as they are commonplace:

the pain of their own childhoods, the tortured relationships they had with their fathers, the collapse of their marriages, their sexuality, their job losses, their love for their children and the deep hurt many of them have carried around for years, often without knowing it.

As one teenage boy who attended a Rites of Passage retreat told this writer: “We heard from grown men who were supposed to be big, strong, dominant figures, but they still had these weaknesses and sadnesses. It suggested that they weren’t all they appeared to be on the outside ... It was such a relief.”

This affliction of the soul that we might call loneliness is a deep and complex issue, not least because it obviously doesn’t just apply to men. It applies to women too. And, yet there is something in the conditioning of boys and men that contributes to a dangerous remoteness that those working at the coalface of youth suicide, homelessness, mental health, juvenile justice and the education system can all too readily testify to.

“It is a major problem,” reiterates John Marsden, school principal and internationally acclaimed author of the *Tomorrow* and *The Ellie Chronicles* book series.

“Perhaps this has always been the case, but when men or boys need support they tend to turn to women,” Marsden says. “I often feel lonely and isolated and I’m sure that, like for many men, my wife is my best friend, yet you almost never hear women saying that about their husbands.”

Both John Marsden and Arne Rubinstein have grown increasingly alarmed by the levels of anxiety they witness every day in students, particularly boys.

“There’s an absolute crisis at the moment,” Rubinstein says. “I know this because I’m doing a lot of work in schools and somewhere between 20 and 40 per cent, or even higher, of the boys are either on medication or diagnosed with some significant mental health disorder. I was at one major private school in Sydney and I asked the head of welfare what percentage of kids did he think were on medication, or diagnosed with some issue, and he said 50 per cent.”

As a medical practitioner who is also trained in adolescent counselling, Rubinstein has formed the view over his many years of working with men that the problems they experience often begin with their fathers.

“That’s the biggest issue amongst older and younger men,” he says. “Not being accepted and acknowledged by their fathers. I also see a lot of men living a life that is

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not actually true for them. They’re living the life they think they’re supposed to live.

“So they can be in a family, they can be at work, but still be lonely. They’re not educated with what you would call healthy coping mechanisms so they tend to internalise and the tougher it gets the more they internalise.”

John Marsden traces his own remoteness from other men to his father. “Having a violent father meant that I’ve always been scared of men,” he says, “so I don’t feel comfortable in their company ... it’s just an unconscious anxiety.

“When I was in high school I got into really quite intense friendships with boys and I think they were like a substitute family for me. But each time the friendships fizzled out, so I’ve never made much of an attempt to bond with a bloke again.”

Michael Shaw, director of Inside Out Ed, an anti-bullying and mindfulness program based in Victoria and New South Wales, speaks with equal candour about this isolation from his own gender, despite having forged deep and lasting friendships with a select few.

“I feel like loneliness has walked side by side with me all through my life,” he offers. “It’s often difficult for men to develop intimacy and closeness with other men because they get the gay tag, the weirdo tag or the wimp tag ... so the very thing that might break the mould of loneliness in men is what we’re acculturated to avoid – to be willing to say to other men: ‘I failed. I feel lonely. I can’t get a hard-on. I’m taking Viagra because I feel sexually failed. My woman doesn’t love me.’ Like most of those topics, men don’t want to touch it.”

American poet and novelist Charles Bukowski once wrote, “there is a loneliness in this world so great that you can see it in the slow movements of the hands of a clock”.

For Steve Biddulph, psychologist and author of landmark books *Raising Boys* and

The New Manhood, this clock has been ticking for hundreds of years, particularly for men.

“In the nightmare of the last few centuries,” he says, “and especially the mid-20th century, men were so hammered by wars, economic dislocation, and migration that they became severely shut down emotionally.

“Their kids, and especially their sons, experienced them as withdrawn, cold and often explosively violent. And the industrial workplace took men out of family life. Very few men of our generation were fathered anywhere near to our basic needs.”

Michael Leunig, arguably Australia’s most beloved cartoonist, a man who has been a source of joyful, imaginative and often hilarious comfort to millions of people for over 40 years, endorses this view. He first witnessed the loneliness of men through observing his own father, an abattoir worker, returning home cut and bloody from slicing and boning sheep and cattle all day.

“I could see a loneliness in him as a consequence of his work because he was excluded from the warm hub of home,” he says. “My mother would be there with her friends, her neighbours, talking, having cups of tea and my father would stagger home at night really a bit broken. He saw it as his duty to bring home the wage, to provide ... and he was kind of misunderstood by his wife, my mother. I think he suffered for that.”

As a young boy Leunig drank in this loneliness, in much the same way all of us – unconsciously or not – absorb the sorrow of our parents’ and grandparents’ generations. “I think we all inherit a kind of pain from our forebears,” he says, “and there was a pain in being alienated from the home, and being sent into factories as my father was. His loneliness was evident to his son.”

As it was to Stan Grant, Sky News correspondent and author of *The Tears of Strangers* and *Talking to My Country*. His own father was an itinerant sawmill worker who, despite grinding poverty on the margins of society, helped save his people’s Wiradjuri language from extinction. “All Aboriginal people have a loneliness that comes from the sadness we are born into,” he says.

“It’s a sadness that is exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness in not being able to protect and defend your family against the weight of the world. I saw this in my father and other Aboriginal men ... and I have definitely felt this sense of isolation myself.”

Every culture defines gender roles uniquely and in the Australian national character it

is easy to see how our ideas of masculinity were shaped by historical forces – our convict origins for one, but also by World War I, which saw hundreds of thousands of husbands, fathers, sons and brothers return home as husks of the men they'd once been – if, of course, they returned home at all.

There was also the enduring power and myth of the Australian bush, where squatters, soldier settlers and farmers who, alone in nature, tamed and ruled themselves as they attempted to tame and rule the land. They developed a rugged self sufficiency.

"The bush has always been as much for hiding pathologies as repairing them," Don Watson wrote in his award-winning book *The Bush*. "The no-speak rule of old persists. In the city, opinion corrodes the outer layer of existence; in the country it eats the inner."

And it is only from within this inner world, according to Steve Biddulph, that a boy

The Men's Shed movement has seen nearly 1000 sheds spring up around the country designed to help men, young and old, connect with each other in traditional and non-traditional ways.

Arts-based schools such as John Marsden's Candlebark and Alice Miller in Victoria's Macedon Ranges are helping build sociability and confidence among students. And Arne Rubinstein's Rites of Passage programs are making huge strides in addressing the isolation and sullen withdrawal boys often experience when going through puberty.

"A rite of passage is about bringing a boy as a young man into a community, and when you're in a community, that very much speaks to loneliness," Rubinstein says.

"The second thing – and the crucial part of a rite of passage – is acknowledging, recognising and celebrating the individual gifts, talents, genius and spirit of the boy,



THE MEN REACHING OUT TO HELP OTHERS (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT): DR ARNE RUBINSTEIN, JOHN MARSDEN, MICHAEL LEUNIG, MICHAEL SHAW AND STEVE BIDDULPH.

might come to understand and articulate the "storms and subtleties" inside himself. "By about 14 each boy feels the pressure mounting to 'be a man', while completely lacking the software," he says. "Most look about for a convenient, ready-made mask, a pretend masculinity that they can pass off as their own – the cool dude, the tough guy, the fun guy, the go-getter, the sensitive new man.

"And they clamp this mask on and try and make it work. The problem is that intimacy isn't possible with a mask [because] the heart of intimacy – which is the willingness to be vulnerable – can't happen."

The good news is today's young fathers spend triple the time with their children than fathers did in the 1980s. Also, organisations like the Black Dog Institute work to promote wellbeing with programs such as Exercise Your Mood, which aims to increase awareness around the relationship between exercise and mental health.

so that he is seen for who he is. This is an incredible way of growing community."

Many years ago Byron Bay businessman James Dods did the program with his son Jack. Today he sings the praises of Rubinstein's work, and yet for all this he sympathises, and identifies strongly, with a generation of men who have attempted to grapple with the challenges feminism has posed.

"What is the modern man now?" Dods asks. "Where does he sit in being super dad, super husband, super recogniser of feminism, while also taking responsibility for the patriarchal society? I really struggle with this shift.

"I think in my father's time men were just men. They weren't expected to be all things. They were expected to be men and now we look back and it wasn't very pretty ... because they were alone too. I just think the masculine is a lonely place to be."

Yes it is, but it doesn't have to be. **J**

SIMPLE STEPS:

Greg McHale, a psychotherapist and university lecturer for the past 40 years, believes a deep discomfort with vulnerability is at the core of men's loneliness. "There are so many gifts in being vulnerable and one of them is intimacy because our vulnerability connects us to others," he says. "But so many men feel that vulnerability is a weakness, something to be hidden, and this secrecy makes men lonely."

There are many steps a man can take in addressing loneliness: joining a men's group; reaching out to friends; finding relevant books to read; going on hiking trips with mates. But ultimately men need to address any hurt they may feel themselves. "Unless you work with your own vulnerability you will continue to come up against yourself," McHale says.

COOL BOOKS FOR MEN:

Steve Biddulph: *Raising Boys* (Finch Publishing) \$29.99

Richard Glover: *Flesh Wounds* (HarperCollins) \$29.99

Stan Grant: *Talking to my Country* (HarperCollins) \$29.99

Available at David Jones

WEBSITES:

Black Dog Institute:
blackdoginstitute.org.au

Arne Rubinstein:
themakingofmen.com

The Pathways Foundation:
pathwaysfoundation.com.au

Australian Men's Shed Association:
mensshed.org

Lifeline:
lifeline.org.au

Beyond Blue:
beyondblue.org.au

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