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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

WORKING WITH MEN – WE ARE DIFFICULT

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Let's do the disclaimers first so that the cries of protest will be softened. This presentation is intended to raise an issue, not give definitive answers. It is based largely in the writer's experience in working with adolescent and adult males who are involved with the criminal justice system. For scholarly discussions and documentation, visit your local university library. All generalities are inherently flawed but what follows is a series of generalities. There is rarely a man who is entirely "masculine" nor a woman who is entirely "feminine" in the characteristics presented herein. Women who do not have any of the characteristics ascribed to males are easily abused and rendered powerless. God surely created each of us uniquely different. Many men do not fit these generalizations.

The Bible as well as the art and literature of all major religions suggests that men and women are different and complement the strengths and weaknesses of each other. Eastern religions, for instance, present the Yin and Yang, opposites associated with the masculine and feminine. Without the feminine, males are not whole. In medieval art men

face outward and women face inward. This portrays, perhaps, the most profound issue in how we view the world and problems that we face. In modern psychology writing, Karsk & Thomas assert that men tend to be extrinsic control oriented, facing outward to see the source of their decisions as being given to them by social convention or experts. Women, on the other hand, look within themselves for information and control.

Recent neurological research suggests that endocrine differences make men less sensitive to pain than women. Psychologists have also suggested that females from birth are much more sensitive to information stimuli (gestures, expressions, voice, etc.) than are men. Inasmuch as there seems to be a basis in gender difference in brain development, it is amazing that most college textbooks and the most quoted theorists such as Erikson and Yalom make no attempt to determine if the effects and tasks of aging have gender differences.

In his developmental research, Kegan observed that females tend to become stuck as adults at the developmental task of looking to others for approval and affirmation. This is a seeming contradiction to ideas of Karsk and Young. This particular difference is a two-edged sword. While both genders benefit from becoming individuated from simply trying to do what others want them to do, many counseling issues involve meeting the needs and expectations of others. Other authors have noted that men use conversation to justify their actions, judge success and persuade. These attributes are generally counterproductive in counseling. Studies have also found men, compared with women, tend to be more argumentative, verbally aggressive and to interrupt the speaker more frequently.

The psychologist, Carl Jung, made the characteristics of the anima (feminine) and animus (masculine) a major component in understanding behavior. His writing makes fascinating reading and is very basically congruent with sound Christian teaching.

There is a sociological component to gender differences in how males and females view counseling issues. In his The Book of Guys, Garrison Keillor states that men are really confused. They are expected to assume some traditional feminine roles such as washing dishes and helping with childcare. At the same time, they are still expected to be carpenters and mechanics who take care of everything that breaks or needs installed and major providers of income.

Men are supposed to develop feelings but yet they are also expected to excel in contact sports in which people are injured and to fight wars. Society still rewards the remorseless utilitarian business executive who sacrifices others for profit.

Men dare not admit any weakness, including emotion. What would happen to a politician who admitted that he or she saw both sides of an issue? The press would crucify that person as weak, waffling, not a fit leader. Do any readers remember what happened to a leading presidential candidate, George Romney, when he admitted he had been wrong about Vietnam? You don't remember him. That's why! He displayed a skill that is vital to profiting from counseling. Gratefully, recent world events have modified the demand for rigid positions. The change is probably compelled by political expediency. "I don't know, there are two ways of looking at it" is still not an option.

Many other sociological gender differences could be discussed at length. Men have huge peer pressure to be king, solve all problems, have the answer to everything and

demand respect. In most of society, respect means you don't question me, resist me or suggest in any way that I might need to change. The male ego is very needy and very fragile. Studies in medical facilities have shown that men may not be reliable reporters of symptoms of heart disease or depression because of their need to defend their invulnerability.

The male ego will come out swinging (physically or verbally) if it feels threatened.. Some cultural groups of men are trained to never listen to a woman and to see women as weak and confused. This is the message I received from my father and hear almost daily from delinquent adolescents. When you hear beliefs and certainties from birth, you tend to believe them and expressing disbelief is likely to be punished. Churches, schools and parents inculcate children and youth with all sorts of rules for living and invoke punishment from God or the culture for disobedience.

Resistance to openness, change and verbal solutions are strongly rewarded in most instances. The ultimate reward is the belief that God approves.

These tendencies to resist admission of need or the unwillingness to change are not a moral issue. The resistive male is not choosing to be "bad." He probably believes that he has no real choice. He both believes and feels that he will be punished if he submits to counseling and change. Introjects about male behavior are deeply imbedded in our culture and counter-productive roles are even more strongly required of street culture and certain ethnic groups. This resistance is, unfortunately, rewarded in some Christian circles.

Enough of restating what the reader either already knows or is ready to

vehemently refute. Following are suggestions for engaging men in the counseling/helping situation and promoting the possibility that there will be a second appointment and change.

1. Find a common ground, i.e. sports, gardening, doing something that is a common interest. Men connect through external interests. Ask about his job or his ‘stuff.’
2. Frame their problem (i.e. working too much, sexual problems, alcohol use) as a normal interest for people but it may be a problem for him and his family. If the issue is instantly “awfulized” it will damage his precious ego and he will flee.
3. Do not make a man look weak or bad in front of his family or peers. Frame him as a well-intentioned hero who has made a mistake and needs a new way to accomplish his worthy goals. I hear the gagging but we must look at the big picture and the long range goals. If he doesn’t come back, even the immediate issue won’t be resolved.
4. Describe him as a helper in family counseling, even if he is the problem. Frame him as an informant and supplier of ideas.
5. Avoid power struggles. The male ego must win. Weakening that ego would take much more time that you probably can give.
6. Be very concrete in your words and instructions, unless you have an educated and cultured man in front of you. Emotional words are incomprehensible to many men. Men tend to confuse ideas and beliefs with feelings. You will find this true when you listen carefully to the language of many men. If you ask, “how did you feel when she said...,” the answer will be, “I felt she was horribly wrong.”

7. Remember that men are “reciprocal.” Change in a family situation that is one-sided is not acceptable. The mantra for most men is, “what’s in it for me.” this demand must be met in some way. No matter how odious it seems, you can’t change anything unless you can keep them coming back.
8. Convey respect for the male but not for the problematic behaviors. Shaming and humiliating will create even more problems. This is especially important if you are working in criminal justice.
9. Stay focused on the immediate issue. Do not try to make profound personality changes unless you have many sessions and have firm rapport.
10. Be very aware of your own possible bias and even counter transferences. Many have been abused in some manner by a man. Some have had huge problems with fathers, boyfriends or male strangers. Even social workers can have unresolved issues that obstruct their judgment..
11. If possible, use male and female co-therapists. Many men, as well as women, have never experienced a man and woman regarding each other as equals and being able to politely disagree.

I am compelled to write one final word of warning. Some Christians in social work are involved in workshops and seminars designed to enhance marriages and provide Biblical models of gender relationships. Some of the cruelest and most violent men treated by this writer have been self-proclaimed Christians and a few managed to become ordained by somebody. They justify their complete disregard for the needs or feelings of their wives or children using isolated “proof texts.” Even very

young adolescents recite these scriptures as justification for abuse and molesting.

Whatever you say or do, beware of empowering males to run amuck with their ego needs for power and control. The injunctions that Jesus gave about not seeking to be first were meant to dethrone and heal the ego.