

# Stop scolding men for being 'toxic'

April 29 2019, by Galen Watts

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What is toxic masculinity? It generally means men behaving badly. Credit: Matheus Ferrero/Unsplash

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Why then are [some so upset about the term?](#)

"Toxic [masculinity](#)" describes a kind of masculinity that encourages or gives legitimacy to misogyny, homophobia and sexual violence. It involves dominating others (especially women), and means resolving disputes with physical conflict and exhibiting an aggressive machismo.

Although social conservatives tend to oppose the term, "[toxic masculinity](#)" they don't necessarily condone behaviour associated with toxic masculinity. For example, in *The National Review* conservative writer David French criticized U.S. President Donald Trump's equation of "aggression with manliness," his "tough guy" act, and his "strutting of the schoolyard bully." French concludes: "[This isn't the masculinity we should respect.](#)"

But some perceive [an all-out attack on men coming from different directions](#). This includes the American Psychological Association's (APA) [recent guidelines](#), "Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men." The guide doesn't mention "toxic masculinity" but it characterizes "traditional masculinity ideology" as: "A particular constellation of standards that have held sway over large segments of the population, including: anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence."

The APA says this traditional masculinity "represents a set of characteristics that are unhealthy for men." I believe when people rail against the term "toxic masculinity" they are, for the most part, seeking to defend what the APA is calling "traditional masculinity."

So debates about toxic masculinity are really about the changing nature of what it means to be a man.

## **The feminization of the economy**

[Western economies have been shifting from manufacturing to a service-based economy since the 1950s.](#) By the end of the 20th century, corporations had outsourced much of their production to the Global South, significantly reducing the number of manual labour jobs.

This shift meant [a dramatic increase in employment opportunities in the](#)

[service industries](#), which require different skills than those in blue-collar jobs: emotional intelligence, communication skills and empathy.

Those changes dovetailed with the feminist movement of the 1960s and a widespread acceptance of second-wave feminist ideals. It meant that western economies and cultures came to value and normalize what have historically been feminine qualities. Traditional masculine traits are no longer as economically valuable as they once were.

Women entered the workforce en masse, challenged preconceived notions of femininity and claimed reproductive rights. Women's [critical reflections](#) gave birth to women's and gender studies in the academy. The term "toxic masculinity" has its roots in the 1980s, when it was introduced by the [Mythopoetic Men's Movement](#), a byproduct of the women's liberation movement.

## **Traditional masculinity considered pathological**

The changes in our economy and culture have rendered old conceptions of masculinity pathological.

Romantic relationships between men and women radically changed.

[Humanistic psychology](#), attuned to the liberal ethos of the 1960s, introduced the need for open communication in healthy [romantic relationships](#). It also fueled a new movement toward self-care and an awareness of mental health.

New ideals on healthy romantic partnerships require men to be more emotionally available, sensitive and vulnerable than traditional masculinity allowed. Today, individuals who do not share their problems are considered at odds with [fulfilling and healthy relationships](#).

These are the underpinnings of the APA's contention that "traditional masculinity is psychologically harmful."

## Let go of masculinity?

Many men, ([especially millennials](#).) have accepted these more egalitarian understandings of romantic partnerships and parenting.

Most men today don't want to revive the masculine ideals of the 1950s. For example, [Terry Crews](#), an ex-NFL player, powerfully attests to the presence of traditional masculinity in the locker room and the harm it caused him.

Some gender theorists like John Stoltenberg believe [that all social definitions of manhood are toxic](#). However, [others disagree](#).

According to evolutionary psychologists like Steven Pinker, there are [reasons](#) for thinking that men and women are never going to be identical. Pinker believes that aiming to stamp out masculinity could cause more harm than good.

Perhaps we need a critical appraisal of APA's guidelines with its condemnation of traditional masculinity? The traits listed are not equally undesirable. And some may not be undesirable at all.

Anti-femininity, violence and eschewal of the appearance of weakness should be challenged. However, masculinities that embrace achievement, adventure and risk (in moderation) seem far less harmful.

Legal scholar and community organizer Jamil Jivani, author of [Why Young Men](#), says: We need to talk less about the "negative way of understanding masculinity" and more about what a "[positive, affirmative identity in men ...for the men among us who...need hope, optimism and](#)

[moral encouragement.](#)"

Those who bewail the loss of traditional masculinity ideology are fighting a losing battle, but I believe those who seek to stamp out all things traditionally masculine, despite their good intentions, are also making a mistake.

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