

# Toxic masculinity is unsafe... for men

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The belief that "real men" must be strong, tough and independent may be a detriment to their social needs later in life. A study co-authored by a Michigan State University sociologist found that men who endorse hegemonic ideals of masculinity—or "toxic masculinity"—can become socially isolated as they age, impacting their health, well-being and

overall happiness.

"When we age, there are certain ways that we can ensure we maintain our health and well-being," said Stef Shuster, MSU assistant professor in Lyman Briggs College and the Department of Sociology. "Having people with whom we can talk about personal matters is a form of social support. If people only have one person that they can share information with, or sometimes even no people, they don't really have an opportunity to reflect and share."

Shuster said that when issues arise, like health or [financial problems](#), it puts individuals in an incredibly disadvantaged position if they don't have anyone to share this with, which also might have negative consequences for their mental health.

"Social isolation is common among aging adults. Changes such as retirement, widowhood or moving to a new home can disrupt their existing friendships," said Celeste Campos-Castillo, one of Shuster's co-authors and an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"Older men who endorse the ideals of toxic masculinity can become siloed off as they age," Shuster said. "Not all [older men](#) are at risk—just those who favor a particular set of ideals."

The researchers analyzed nearly 5,500 U.S. [older women](#) and men from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey, which administered the Hegemonic Masculinity for Older Men Scale.

The study—published in the journal *Sex Roles*—is one of the first to treat masculinity as a spectrum rather than a simple yes-or-no binary category.

"A lot of gender research is based on simplistic binaries of women or men, feminine or masculine, either you're hegemonically masculine or you're not," shuster said. "Because of the data set that we're using, our study actually looks at masculinity on a spectrum."

The study also found that embracing toxic masculinity is self-harming.

"Often, toxic masculinity is a term that we use to describe how masculinity affects other people, especially women," shuster said. "But our study shows how [toxic masculinity](#) also has detrimental consequences for the men who subscribe to these ideals. The very premise of hegemonic masculinity in some ways is based on the idea of isolation because it's about being autonomous and not showing a lot of emotion. It's hard to develop friendships living this way."

As [baby boomers](#) prepare to retire from the workforce, they face challenges in finding and sustaining healthy friendships. The researchers suggest social isolation may be alleviated by embracing an alternative understanding of masculinity that doesn't rely on independence and toughness as the only way to be "real men," or at least easing up on the principles of hegemonic masculinity.

Still, shuster recognizes that the higher men score on the scale of hegemonic [masculinity](#), the less likely they are to change their views or seek help.

"Can you change someone's ideological principles? I think that's a harder sell than trying to get people to believe that [social isolation](#) is incredibly detrimental to their health," shuster said. "It's about learning how to offer tools for people not to be socially isolated and helping them develop the capacity to recognize that all of the ways they have upheld being so-called 'real men' is not going to work for them as they age."

**More information:** Celeste Campos-Castillo et al, Warning: Hegemonic Masculinity May Not Matter as Much as You Think for Confidant Patterns among Older Men, *Sex Roles* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-020-01131-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01131-3)

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