

'He is always there to listen': Friendships between young men are more than just beers and banter, say researchers

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Male friendships are often presented [in the media](#) and [popular culture](#) as relatively superficial, competitive and lacking in emotional depth.

With this in mind, it's not entirely surprising that some people seem to

think men have a problem with friendships. While women may be especially quick to draw this [conclusion](#), the idea exists in society as a whole.

Men, we are led to believe, either have low quality friendships, or [not enough of them](#). They [lean on women for intimacy](#), shying away from deep and real connections elsewhere.

All of this supposedly increases their chances of loneliness, dysfunction and even [suicide](#). But is this the whole story?

Although we know some men do struggle with friendships—indeed, some men have discussed [having no male friends at all](#)—such representations tell a selective, and, we would argue, ultimately inaccurate story of the relationships men build and sustain.

It's true that men often relate to others differently than women. For example, they might talk less about their emotions. But if we look closely at the way men express themselves and connect to other people, we can begin to see the beating heart of male friendships that's rarely acknowledged, and often dismissed.

While women may be more skilled at [emotional expressions](#), not all of their conversations are helpful. Some female-to-female friendships can lack [empathy and understanding](#), or the support expected of friends during life's [trials and tribulations](#).

By focusing on the relative lack of verbal expression to suggest that male friendships are not close, we risk [limiting](#) our understanding of what intimacy is. We then do not see how men demonstrate closeness less obviously, in coded ways, or even silently.

Humor is one example

Contrary to the notion that it's used to "put up walls," humor, such as the use of provocative nicknames, can promote a sense of [closeness](#). Humor in the military, for instance, is used to express the hardships of the work and channel aggression, all the while creating a sense of [togetherness](#).

There's an irony in the fact that talk between men which might be construed as offensive to an outside observer, instead can signify an emotional closeness that could only be established between good friends. As one participant in [a study](#) of male insults said, "Maybe down the track you might become close enough and then you might start ripping into each other [...] I think if people hear you talking like that to other blokes, then they definitely know you're good mates."

Resisting masculinity

Amid unspoken rules that men should be "macho" and not express weakness, it's no wonder they sometimes struggle to open up emotionally.

But readings of male friendships as shallow assume that men are unable to negotiate the rules of masculinity. The truth is that [regimes of masculinity](#) are largely imposed on men, and they do their best to [play the game](#), or subvert masculinity if they can.

Many men resist competitive masculinity enough to express vulnerabilities and create deep connections. Still, some men (especially "traditional" men) bury emotions so deeply that it can be hard for them to know what they feel, or even how to name their emotions. Feelings can become foreign, frightening territory, with the temptation to use alcohol and drugs to [deal with them](#).

For some men, opening up and expressing vulnerability is not an option,

or perhaps only becomes possible in certain contexts. Drinking is one such context. "Lads will only talk when there's beer on board, you know, when the guard is down," as one participant noted in [a different study](#) of communication in male friendship.

The risks of opening up include rejection and shaming. But emotional intimacy is possible even in the most unlikely situations, such as [stag parties](#), where emotional expressions of male-to-male love are common (for example, during speeches), and are not scorned.

The rise of the bromance

Despite simplistic depictions of men, male friendships are diverse and evolving. Hysteria around homosexuality has undergone a [long decline](#) over the decades, and the threat of the gay label no longer instills such panic in young men who dare to express sensitivity and seek intimacy with other men, sexual or non-sexual.

No phenomenon illustrates this better than the rise of the "bromance." The term may have emerged from skateboarding in the 1990s, when heterosexual men commonly [shared hotel rooms](#) while on tour. The idea of this strong male-to-male bond has even been given a nod in popular culture, with films like [I Love You, Man](#).

Bromances can offer a high level of intimacy and support. Young men talk about how their bromances are [on another level](#) to friendships in terms of trust, expression of vulnerability and physical affection.

One participant in a study of bromances noted: "I hug him and kiss him and tell him I love him." Another said a bromance involves "someone you can share secrets and pain with, and love, but there is no sort of sexual attraction." A third stated: "It doesn't matter what you tell him, he is always there to listen."

'Leveling up' male friendships

Research shows [younger men](#) are engaging in close male friendships and expressing their feelings like never before. They are adept at negotiating the rules of masculinity. They will open up to others in safe contexts—although not all men have these safe spaces.

We believe creating more of these safe zones for young men is key. For example, it seems that by encouraging men to do activities [side by side](#), or that have a "purpose" (such as volunteering or attending [men's sheds](#) to create things), male bonding and important conversations [naturally emerge](#).

Although there are concerns that some [online activities](#) and forums can be dangerous (for example, potentially increasing the risk of recruitment into [online misogyny](#) groups), anonymous online discussion forums can help men [connect and express themselves](#) about the things that matter without fear of judgment.

And with the caveat that alcohol has obvious problems, if men are going to drink then doing so with friends may not be the worst way of encouraging [emotional connections](#).

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