

# Why 'toxic masculinity' isn't a useful term for understanding all of the ways to be a man

October 12 2023, by Richard Gater

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There seem to be as many interpretations of what "toxic masculinity" means as there are uses of the term.

Some believe it's a way to criticize what they see as specific negative behavior and attitudes often associated with men. Others, such as

broadcaster Piers Morgan, claim that media interest in toxic masculinity is part of a "[woke culture](#)" that aims to emasculate men. Others believe toxic masculinity is a fundamental part of [manhood](#).

My [research](#) into working-class young men in south Wales shows how masculinity is changing. Some men remain hostile to the notion of toxic masculinity and see the term as a vehicle for shaming men. And some are caught in a conflict between changing ideas of masculinity and traditional, unhealthy expressions of manhood. This is further complicated by the term itself.

In its simplest sense, toxic masculinity refers to an overemphasis or exaggerated expression of characteristics [commonly associated](#) with masculinity. These include traits such as competition, self-reliance and being stoic, which produce behaviors such as risk-taking, fear of showing weakness, and an inability to discuss emotions. These have negative implications for both men and women.

For example, a rejection of weakness and vulnerability may prevent some men from [discussing issues](#) such as mental health. Similarly, an inability to express emotion may expose itself through frustration, anger and acts of physical violence.

But [masculine traits](#) such as being stoic can equally be valuable in some circumstances, such as emergencies and making lifesaving decisions. In essence, masculinity is complex, diverse and can be expressed in multiple ways.

## **More than one type of masculinity**

However, masculinity that involves courage, toughness and physical strength has [historically](#) been held in high regard by society.

Masculinity is socially, historically, culturally and individually determined, and subject to change. It can be influenced by a person's status, power, place, [social class](#) and ethnicity. So, a person's differing circumstances establish or enable different expressions of masculinity.

For example, traditionally high rates of manual employment in heavy industries and [family relationships](#) helped establish the gender roles of the male breadwinner and female homemaker. This reinforced masculine traits such as toughness and stoicism in men.

In recent decades though, the way people in western countries work has changed a lot. Manual jobs have [decreased](#) while service sector work has increased. These alterations have contributed to the increase in [the number of women](#) working, and their wages have become an [important part](#) of household incomes.

Movements like [#MeToo](#) and brands like Gillette and its We Believe: The Best Men Can Be advert have led to further [examination](#) of masculinity. They have challenged negative expressions of masculinity, encouraging men to change their behavior and instead adopt a [more positive](#) version of masculinity.

Against this backdrop, we urgently need to reassess what the current research tells us about men and masculinity.

## **Men are changing**

Some [studies](#) suggest that men are changing their behavior as society and the economy change. For example, studies of white, middle-class men who attend university have found that they are more likely to express their emotions verbally and physically.

But [critics](#) of that idea say that such young men can transgress typical

notions of masculinity because of their higher social status.

A new wave of qualitative research has shown that some [working-class](#) young men are changing their behavior. They are more open about their emotions, admit to feeling vulnerable and have more egalitarian views on housework. However, they still sometimes use sexist and homophobic language.

My recent [study](#) is part of a growing criticism of how masculinity is defined and talked about. I carried out my research at a youth center and focused on a group of working-class young men aged between 12 and 21. I talked to the young men about their school experiences, work ambitions and looked at their behavior.

The study was based in the Gwent valleys, a former coal mining community. It is a place known for its traditional ideas of masculinity, such as being strong and tough. But also I found that these young men showed softer sides of masculinity, such as empathy, compassion and sensitivity.

These changes and softer sides of masculinity coexisted with behaviors often linked with negative expressions of masculinity, such as violence and crime. I describe this as "[amalgamated masculinities](#)."

My findings strengthen the idea that positive changes in masculinity are happening socially.

## **Changing the narrative**

We must be aware of the harm caused by exaggerated masculine traits but language like "[toxic masculinity](#)" can be unhelpful. We should focus on promoting the benefits of positive expressions of manhood, such as emotional openness and empathy.

We should also do more work to try to understand why positive changes in masculinity are happening. Once we understand this, we can think about how to encourage these positive changes to make them more common in society. This could help to make [masculinity](#) better for everyone.

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