

Exclusive interview: Dr David Wexler on men and shame

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Current UK statistics show that both prison and suicide rates for men are high. Young men are falling behind in secondary education and porn addiction is described as a 21st century epidemic. Dr Jan Mojsa talks to Dr David Wexler about what may be one of the main contributing factors to this, shame.

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JAN: David I know that you've written quite a bit about men, one of your books is actually called Men and Therapy. I wonder if you can just say a little bit, David, about how you've come to really being to speak about shame and how it's so important for you in the work?

DAVID: Well, I first really developed a special interest in dealing with men's issues because of work I started doing with domestic violence. 25 years ago, in the mid-80s, I put together a group that got a contract with the US navy to develop domestic violence treatment programs for their personnel who they were treating.

I didn't know a lot about that subject, but I was able to study up on it and put together a panel of people who did and I started running those groups and learning as I went along. What I saw so prominently is that not only... well, actually, I was expecting that the guys in that room were going to be frankly - to use a clinical term - scumbags and I thought I was going to really not like them and really have a hard time being in the same room with people who were spouse abusers, wife beaters.

There were, obviously, some who lived down to my expectations, but what I found most is that the guys in those rooms and guys in those groups, frankly, were not that different from me and most of the other people, other men that I knew who were not exactly domestic violence offenders, but they were dealing with men's issues and they were dealing with conflicts that relationship stirred up.

They were dealing with issues left over from their fathers or left over from being hurt in previous relationships. They were dealing with issues having to do with pressures that men feel about living up to a certain standard of masculinity and how off centre men can feel when that is, in some way, challenged or when they doubt that.

The shame issue that most of these men were dealing with was so clearly the trigger for their offensive behaviour - their domestic violence - that it became so prominent to me that I started thinking about it more, reading about it more and,

ultimately, putting together my own ideas in writing about more.

From that I ended up applying a lot of those - the things that I was learning in these groups with violent men - to more everyday relationships, to the types of men who, like all of us or most of us, men who struggle with our relationships, struggle with parenting issues, have issues about masculine identity and the shame issue - or what I call the 'shame-o-phobia' issues - turns out to be right at the centre of a lot of what governs men's wellbeing, ultimately it governs their behaviour in the relationships.

JAN: So, in that sense does it feel that men and women differ in terms of their experiences of shame?

DAVID: Yes. Although they probably, in human beings, is probably the single most important variable which means that our experiences are, in many ways, the same.

However, there are certain aspects of being male that generates a certain quality of shame or being afraid of being ashamed that I think is different for women.

When I work with couples - and I do most of my work now with couples - I see women governed a lot by anxiety, fears about being abandoned, fears about losing connection with the men in their lives and I see men, primarily, concerned with falling short in some way, feeling like they are failing in their job as a husband or as a father.

That fear of failure is best understood in the shame model, that men are really - more so than woman - in my experience, preoccupied with not doing the job right and that we usually think of that in terms of broad measures like of not making enough money or not being physically strong or not being able to handle some tough situations.

But in the role of relationships, when men feel like they are not making their wife or partner happy or they are failing in some way in dealing with their kids, they often feel like... they feel ashamed. They feel like they are letting somebody down.

This would be not such a problem if a man can say - and this is what I'm trying to get men to be able to say - if a guy could say "wow, when you tell me that it bothered you how I treated you at this party last night, that made me feel really bad about myself and I feel like I'm letting you down. This is hard for me. Can we talk about this?"

That would be a perfectly healthy response. But that's not what usually happens. What usually happens is the guy becomes defensive. He feels - and the word I use is shame-o-phobic - he is highly sensitised to the possibility and the dreadful experience of feeling shame, feeling less than.

If he gets some kind of criticism or complaint from his partner about any aspect of his performance in his rulebook, he takes that as she is activating that shame feeling he has and does one of two things: he either withdraws and shuts down - which men are, unfortunately, quite prone to doing - or he lashes out in some sort of defensive reaction at the person who, at that moment, has made him feel bad.

Emotionally it's, kind of, a primitive response. It's basically a flight or fight response. If my wife says something to me that makes me feel bad about myself, suddenly feel like [gasp] my world is in danger, I'm not good enough and I can't

bear that.

The most important person in the world to me - which is her - is seeing me in this negative way and that often brings out a less than wonderful response from me.

One of the terms that I use to help create an image, to help men understand this and women, also, is what's called the broken mirror. In a lot of the different books that I've written or workshops that I teach, this is one of the cornerstone ideas that I try to get across.

The mirror notion really comes from the field of self-psychology. The idea is that we pay very close attention to the response from another important person in our lives to govern our view of ourselves.

So, if my wife says something that's critical of me or I can see the look on her face that she's unhappy with me, that's a mirror reflecting back a picture of me that I am failing and I can tell.

How do I know? Because I just have to look at her to see that I've made her unhappy. That's a broken mirror experience and that's unavoidable. We all have broken mirror experiences all the time in everyday business relationships, walking down the street, talking with our friends, our kids... it's normal to have that.

What's not normal is to become really obsessed with it because, I think, one of the things that distinguishes what I would call more healthy male response - or female as well, this broken mirror is not just male, but it's just worse for men - is that a healthy response is to say "I hate feeling this way... I can't stand that when my wife is unhappy with me... I feel like my kids are pushing me away in some way. It makes me feel really bad about myself. But, you know what. I'm a big boy and I can handle this negative feeling. It's frustrating; maybe I can learn something from this... it's difficult."

Unfortunately, what happens is that when I or other men experience this broken mirror feeling, is some of this other negative reactions come out - just like I was describing before as the fight or flight thing. Either withdrawing or lashing out.

JAN: It sounds like it comes from such a vulnerable place and, actually, what you're describing there seems like just vulnerability. As you've been talking, David, I was thinking about the vulnerability of men and I wondered, in your view, what are some of those issues for men that create that real heightened vulnerability.

DAVID: Well, vulnerability is definitely the word to use. My most popular book is called *When Good Men Behave Badly*¹ and the notion I'm really trying to transmit with that title that many times - I guess this isn't true for hard core sociopaths or psychopaths - but for the vast majority of other men who, at times, do things that are self-centred or hurtful to somebody else or insensitive, all these different behaviours, which are clearly bad behaviours or destructive behaviours in some way, at the heart of that soul of the person who's operating is a good guy who wants to be doing better.

But something has just activated this negative behaviour or rather dysfunctional behaviour. The experience that boys have growing up in most cultures of the world that I know - certainly in Western cultures - is boys receive a steady stream of messages about what it takes to be a real boy or, later on, a real man.

There is something what's called 'the boy code' William Pollack², an author, has written about this, he wrote a book called Real Boys in the late 90s and it coined the term 'the boy code.'

We know not that there's such a thing in adult version called 'the guy code' where you have to make sure to act like you're in control, you have to be competent, you can't look like you're too weak or vulnerable. You certainly can't do anything that would in any way make people think that you're acting like a girl because that's like - no offence - the lowest of the low in boy world, is to be caught acting like a girl.

Like if you're playing some sports and you're "throwing like a girl" or "quit crying like a little girl" or the various derogatory terms like "quit acting like a pussy" all of those kinds of terms are basically saying "if you step outside of this box of male behaviour then you are failing and you are shaming yourself."

All of the prohibitions about boys not wanting to look queer "oh, that's so gay! Quit acting like a fag!" All those things are saying "you are not acting like a real boy is supposed to act."

Every boy that I know of gets a steady stream of those messages from the media, from their brothers, from their father, from peers, from football coaches, from teachers. It's everywhere.

Some are in environments where it's really strict and rigid, others where it's less so, but those messages do show up everywhere. Every boy I know knows those rule and especially if you are exposed to a father who highlights those messages, who make shaming comments to you about things like "you're no son of mine" or "when are you going to grow up?" or "quit crying like a little baby" or, I guess, one of the ultimate shaming experiences for boys which is to have no father, to have a father who abandons them in one form or another, where it leads to the boy feeling like he is unworthy of a father's love or praise or support, someone really that his father just checked out and has permanently gone or very marginally present in his life.

That feeds some of this vulnerability that boys feel. Boys know you don't have to be just like a soldier in war or something who's given very strict male messages or on a sports team where you're given strict male messages, you don't have to be in those environments, necessarily, boys know that if they fall short in some way bad things happen.

They end up getting ridiculed, they feel, they have this external chain message which they've incorporated as an internal chain message.

The way in which that's particularly a problem, in terms of intimate relationships - which is really what I think is most important for men to work on - is that when something comes along where it's clear that a man is falling short in some way - which in most relationships I know happens about a couple of thousand times every week (that's a joke) but something happens on a frequent basis where a man feels like "oh, I didn't do this right!" or "I should have done this better" or "that's not what she wanted to hear from me" or "I missed the boat here."

If somebody is walking around with this particular vulnerability they hear normal levels of complaints or they read normal levels of frustration or disappointment around them and exaggerate it, that what they hear, the message is somehow "you are a complete failure."

Let me just tell you one story that I think illustrates this. I was once doing an

interview, very much like this, with a man and I was talking about this broken mirror idea and the shame-o-phobia. After the interview was over and we were no longer being taped, he said to me "now I understand what happened with me and my girlfriend yesterday."

The story he proceeded to tell me was that he had been in the bathroom shaving and he had nicked himself shaving - as men sometimes are known to do and he put one of these little toilet paper wads on the cut - which men are known to do. He walked out and his girlfriend saw that and she, kind of, teased him about it.

She said something like "what's up with you and shaving? You did that last week too."

Well, he proceeded to go over, get right in her face -he didn't physically assault her- but he started getting very close to her in a threatening manner, screaming at her, calling her names "you controlling..." you know what and "what the hell is wrong with you? Am I not man enough for you?" all these different diatribes against her.

He said, now, after having the conversation about the broken mirror, he understands what was happening for him. It was as if she was saying to him "you are some total loser. You sorry excuse for a male, you can't even do this basic guy thing right? You can't even shave without screwing that up? What the hell is wrong with you?"

That's what he heard. That is not what she was saying. At worst she was being a little critical and at best she was just playing with him. She was just affectionately teasing him.

But he was walking around with this vulnerability to being shamed and when, in the normal discourse of their relationship, something came along that slightly looked bad, he found that intolerable and turned it into something disastrous for the relationship.

JAN: It sounds like what you were actually able to do with this guy was just actually offer a bit of an insight into what had happened. It didn't sound like you were going deep into feeling as such, but you were just able to point something out. Look at this way...

DAVID: And that was not a therapy session. It was just an interview like this one where he picked up a few perspectives.

A couple of things that I find particularly helpful in working with men to help them manage this kind of... the internal response that leads to some sort of negative external response.

In addition to what I think you're pointing out - which is just a cognitive awareness, a different... the mind-set to be on the lookout for the broken mirror experience and to recognise it sometime is a distortion of reality or a distortion of what's really taking place. That's half the battle. It's just that level of consciousness.

But, another thing is a term I borrowed from Marsha Linehan's³ work with DBT - Dialectal Behaviour Therapy - she uses the term 'distress tolerance' which she really developed from Buddhist principles.

The idea here is when something negative comes your way and your feelings are hurt, you feel frustrated, you feel worried, you feel sad, you feel depressed any of

the normal range of human emotional states, to cultivate the capacity to tolerate that distress without having to either run from it and numb it out - like get drunk for example or emotionally shut down - or by turning against the person who seems like has somehow caused you to feel that way. Or without feeling like you have to do something bold and hyper masculine to prove that you're not weak because you're feeling sad or anxious or frustrated.

A real man is capable of distress tolerance. Is able to say "it hurts my feelings that my wife didn't want to spend time with me tonight" or "that she didn't want to have sex with me" or that "my kids aren't really listening to me."

Okay, that's not fun, but, I guess, that's part of what I signed up for in terms of being in a relationship. I feel that way sometimes - and I'm sure she feels that way sometimes too. But just to be able to tolerate that distress.

Another term that kind of piggybacks on there is another term from self-psychology called the independent centre of initiative - which is a complex phrase but the concept is very simple.

All it means, really, is that if I want to talk to my wife and she's in a bad mood or she's distracted with something, part of my job in managing my own reactions to that is to recognise that she has her own independent reasons for feeling this way, reacting this way.

She may be in just her own mood because she's a complex person who's had an interesting day that's put her in a bad mood and it's not necessarily about me. It's not a statement of me, it's not a rejection of me, it's not an indictment of me - well, sometimes it could be - but plenty of times it's not.

I want to just recognise that she may have her own reasons for not exactly being who I need her to be at this particular moment and that's how it should be tolerable.

It's really a kind of advanced notion of empathy I guess, really trying to - what some therapists call mentalise - to be able to think about her experience and how that might be affecting her behaviour without it necessarily being about me, without it having to be a broken mirror or a shame activator, it's just, at worse, frustrating or maybe a little hurtful.

But... big deal. We should have the capacity to tolerate modest levels of those states.

So, some of the coaching that I do with men is to get them to keep remembering those skill packages to help them deal with the vulnerability that they feel.

JAN: What I'm really noticing in what you're saying there, David, is - and I really like that phrase that you've just used about the skill packages, that there's something to do - there's a very straightforward plan of things to do and it sounds as if that works quite successfully.

DAVID: Yes, I think that's true. I break it down to several different components.

One is what I call - the psychology word, of course, would be the cognitive awareness or cognitive reframe - but, in more everyday language it's what I call the story you tell yourself.

So, if one of these broken mirror moments - or potential broken mirror moments take place - I tell men "check your story, make sure that you are trying on different

possible stories for what is happening here. It's quite possible that the story you're telling yourself is leading you down a nasty path which, once you get that story in place, you may feel very justified in acting in some way that is cold, passive aggressive, rejecting, withdrawing, directly aggressive or whatever."

The second part of it is what I was discovering before about keeping in mind some of the skills about managing your own emotional state - like the distress tolerance.

The third part, of course, is interpersonal skills, is finding ways to put your needs/feelings/thoughts/views into a language that is connecting with your partner.

This is something that is often like a foreign language for many men. There's research on what's called normative male alexithymia, which is another fancy term which basically means men who have difficulty putting words to their feelings.

It's called 'normative' because it's so normal, statistically, among many of us men and for a lot of the men that I work with it never even occurs to them to say something like "it bothered me when you said this to me because it made me feel like you don't really value me."

That's a statement that most partners, gay or straight, can relate to. Okay, now we have something to talk about.

If the guy just withdraws - which is what many men do - and act out some other more passive aggressive or if they become more aggressive and blaming - like the guy with the razor issue - then we don't have connection, we don't have conversation.

Many men are hungry for specific skills or strategies for how to put some of those things into language that will actually make a difference or actually be connecting with their partner.

There's a Jungian therapist whose books I read years named Jack Sanford⁴ who wrote a book called Invisible Partners.

One of the things he talked about in there was the difference between moods and feelings for men. A mood, he talks about is that cloud that takes over which makes somebody... when a woman I talk to says "I just have to walk on eggshells. I didn't want to provoke the sleeping bear. I just felt like he was going to be set off so easily."

That's the mood. She's sensing he is in 'the mood' which is differently than actually having feelings. Having feelings or saying things like "I'm worried about this, I'm hurt about this, I'm sad about this, I'm feeling scared about this..." Those are feelings that another person is, potentially, can be included "in the club," can be included "in the conversation."

Many men need education about the distinction between just 'being in a mood' and actually identifying feelings that, for one thing will help them understand themselves a little bit better rather than just things suck or I'm having a bad day. But, also, will allow the other person into their frame.

That's another part of the skillset that I think many men can and do benefit from.

JAN: So you're drawing together a number of the skills or the skills package and one of the methods, if you like, of... they're, kind of, like a way of coaxing, or bringing it out, whatever it is.

I can imagine, from what you're describing, is that 'it' can potentially feel like an

'it' if you don't have the words to begin to communicate.

I wonder, David, if you could, just from your vast experience, maybe give us examples of a case you've worked with where you've included some of these very method skills and so on in your work, with a man.

DAVID: Okay. One man that I can think of that I worked with a lot, in terms of his expectations about what his wife could provide for him in the relationship.

This is not a guy who had some dramatic story with domestic violence or chronic philandering or explosive behaviour or drug addiction or anything else, but this was somebody who kept turning to his female partner to make sure to provide for his emotional wellbeing and he would continue to blame her when she wasn't coming through for him - when she wasn't able to make him feel good about himself, she wouldn't want to have sex with him or wouldn't want to be affectionate with him or she had certain needs of her own that conflicted with his, he would see that as some sort of betrayal and he would engage in one of the things that was most lethal for a lot of men which is wallowing in self-pity.

I can usually smell trouble when I hear men saying things like "well, I deserve better" or "that wasn't fair" or "nobody was paying attention to me and my needs."

One of the things that this guy kept getting into was he would alienate himself from the family. When his kids wouldn't listen to him or his kids would turn more to their mother, he would feel sorry for himself and go off and pout. He would say "I guess I'm not that important around here" or "I'm just an ATM machine."

All of this was feeding this self-pity thing. As often happens, it became a, kind of, self-fulfilling prophecy. The more that he would try to make other people feel guilty or act quietly resentful - because he wasn't explosively resentful - he would just pout, that actually did alienate his wife and his kids.

So, part of the task for him that we worked on - and I was seeing he and his wife as a couple - part of the task for him was to get him to be clearer when there was some particular kind of attention that he really needed from his wife. To not just expect her to know what that was, to be clearer about what that was and to be open to the possibility that she wasn't going to be able to pull that off 100% of the time.

I remember one time I said to him "there's something you need to know. Maybe during the honeymoon phase of your relationship you felt like your wife was always making you feel good. But here we are, 15 years later, you've settled into a regular old life and she's not going to be able to do that now."

What was funny is when I said the word "now" he said "you mean she will be in the future? You mean she'll be able to do that sometime later?"

I said "no, no... no. Let's be 100% clear about this. She will not be able to take care of all of those emotional needs that you have now or ever. She can be a wonderful wife to you - and she is - not perfect, but plenty good enough.

But you are focusing on the times when you're not feeling good from her or when you feel somehow knocked down a peg in some way, in her eyes. You're focusing on those rather than paying attention to the valuable things you have.

When you continue to focus on that negativity and get into the self-pity part, you are pushing her away - which is the last thing that you ever want to do. You push your kids away when you act like that - which is the last thing that you ever want to

do. "

Part of the work in this couple was - in addition to trying to get through to him - was to empower her because it was not helping him when she would start to feel guilty and try to tailor to his pouting or emotional state, that was not healthy. It was not healthy for her and not healthy for him.

So, part of what we tried to equip her to do is to be clearer with him when he was pouting or whatever, to say - in maybe more polite terms "knock it off, this is not okay for you to do this. I love you, I want to get close to you, there's plenty of times when I want to be available to you and I really need you. Right now is not one of the times and I'm counting on you to be able to handle that."

The balance in the relationship of helping her develop more of a stronger voice about sticking up for what obviously needed to be stuck up for and for him to be able to adjust his expectations and still recognise how much value he had in that relationship - both him as a husband and him as a father - that turned out to be very successful for him.

One of the things he said to me was that - and I remember seeing him several years later as a follow up - he said "I hated it when you kept challenging me about that. I hated it when you kept telling me that I'm not always going to get my needs met and I needed to find some different way to deal with it. But it was the best message I ever got. That helped me mature and I know this sounds..." - I'm paraphrasing what he said - it sounds sort of sappy, but it really helped him look at the half full glass in his life, in his relationship rather than always focusing on the half empty glass.

That's an example of the way I try to approach men like that.

One other thing I just want to add is that I find that because I'm a man, because of worked so much with men and thought so much about this, I recognise that men really need to be... they need to feel good about themselves.

So, when I'm trying to pack some message that is a criticism, basically, or telling them that there's something they're doing that is getting in the way, I always want to make sure that they clearly hear from me "I really value, I know your heart is in the right place, there are a lot of things you're doing right and this is something we need to fix so you can do it even better."

When men feel like they are really valued and respected and somebody gets some of their pain or some of their experience, I find that a lot of men just open it up and say "bring it up, tell me... okay, I know you believe in me, I know you get me. Tell me what I can do differently because I want to do this better."

If you don't go ahead with that first step, going, if the guy does not feel really respected and valued, then all the brilliant suggestions or corrections in the world fall on deaf ears.

That's part of the 'good man behaving badly.' I really want to make sure that that message gets through to every man that I work with.

JAN: I guess because there can be such a potential there for re-wounding...

DAVID: Yes.

JAN: ...and shame.

DAVID: It's difficult sometimes because the men that I'm talking about are wound pretty tight and they're pretty brittle and have a very narrow range of how much they can accept something, hearing something that might be less than perfect about themselves. Yet, still that message has to come through.

So, finding that balancing act between making sure to have empathy and respect for them but, still, making sure that they hear there's another way that they need to do this. That's the tricky part.

It's tricky, I think, not just for a therapist but for somebody who's in a relationship with that same guy.

JAN: There's a lot in what you're saying, again, that's around being very accepting, very valuing. I love in your stories how you're often very instructional with guys just showing how it is or maybe there's another way or another strategy of looking at something. I really noticed that in your work, David.

DAVID: Well, thank you. One of the things I think is important with that, it fits with some of these themes that we're talking about, is, in my work, as a male therapist for men, I do a lot of self-disclosure.

I talk about some way in which I really messed up in my relationship with my wife or some time when I overreacted with my kids or some way in which I had to deal with some issue with my father.

I'm doing that for a couple of different reasons, not because it's my own therapy session - which would not be a good reason to do it. The main reason is I'm trying to model, for men, that there is no shame here - there might be some remorse about when you've screwed up in some way.

But, we are all in this club together. This club called 'this imperfect human being' or specifically 'this imperfect male club.'

My message to the guy would be "the fact that you're struggling with this issue, right now, does not make you a freak, it makes you human. It still means you've got a lot of work to do."

But what I find is shame is not our friend, in working with men, that if something happens in a relationship or something happens in a therapeutic environment or counselling environment that creates more shame for the guy... he's gone, we've lost him. He's not available to seeing himself clearly or getting some positive proactive guidance.

So, the self-disclosure part helps to de-shame the experience that they're having by, basically, saying "I get it. Look at me. Here's an example where I struggled with that same issue."

JAN: That's so beautiful! We could all do with that at times. It's actually where we just say "welcome to the human race."

DAVID: Exactly.

JAN: There's something so beautiful in that and very healing.

DAVID: Welcome to the world of parenting, welcome to the world of relationships... all of those things. That's a de-shaming message to offer.

JAN: Yes. David, I know that you've also written quite a bit - and I'm kind of interested in this, in relation to women therapists who work with men - I wonder if you have anything to say there or advice or anything in relation to women therapist working with men.

Not just about shame, maybe in other things in general.

DAVID: Yes. I have written a lot about that and one of the people who are sort of my guide or guru in that field is a woman named Holly Sweet⁵ who wrote a book that came out a couple of years ago called Gender in the Therapy Room or Gender in the Therapy Office... something to that effect.

It was a collection of different essays by female therapists about their work with different men - in the military, gay men, men with drug addictions, etc.

What I've observed - because I have supervised lots of women who've worked with men, I've run co-ed groups where female therapists watch what happens with their interactions with men - some of the principles that we're talking about here, about being really respectful of the shame issues and the broken mirror issues, it's really important for women to keep that in mind because they may not be quite as conscious of that as a male therapist might - although it could be other male therapists were not thinking that way also.

Also, to recognise that some of the times - I hate to discourage my own gender - but sometimes men are very concrete and they need messages, they want to get information transmitted to them in systematic fashion, not some roundabout thing.

Not necessarily exploring your inner self, but, "tell me what your picture of what is going wrong here. I want to know point number one, point number two, point number three..." and when a guy says that, it's really important that the female therapist jumps right into action and recognises that's the way this guy's mind is working.

If I want to get through to him, I need to organise him in his nice little bullet points of these sequences.

Another part, related to that, is a lot of men really like to have homework. Men are action oriented. Give me the manual, I want to know how to fix it, what do I do?

I find sometimes that female therapists are, sometimes, not as quick to pick up on that and recognise that when a guy says that we've got to have some homework for him. Either something he's got to read, a description of a technique he's going to try or even just invent something on the fly about what he can do, specifically, to keep track of the issues of behaviours that you're working on and that's what's most likely to be most helpful to that particular guy.

The other thing, of course, to keep in mind is that men project a lot of issues onto women and sometimes, actually, men prefer to have female therapist because they are afraid that if they get a male therapist they might have some sort of male competitive thing and they feel like that would be safer, with a woman.

Plus, I've had men say this to me, "well, if you're going to talk about your relationship... well, women are like relationship experts so why wouldn't I go... if I can take my car in and I might associate that a guy is more likely to be able to fix a car... but a woman's more likely to be able to fix a relationship."

So that can actually come in very handy because if there's a positive transference - that the positive expectation about the wisdom and special touch that a woman has - that's something to really recognise and not do anything to dispel. I think that really can be in the service of that female therapist and male patient relationship.

So I think the main things are that... is for women to make sure to keep in mind the very principles we've been talking about this whole time and to also...

Oh, one other thing I think is important here, to recognise that for a guy to walk in to some clinical setting or counselling setting or group or individual or couples - maybe there's some guys who are perfectly fine with that - but the majority of them, this is downright scary.

This needs to be recognised from the second they walk in the door. The first response should be "I'm really glad you were able to come in here today. I have a feeling this took a lot for you to do that."

We might not think to say that as much to a female client because women are, usually, more comfortable in the arena of talking about their feelings and seeking help from others, that is more compatible with female identity. It's less so with male identity and that really needs to be proactively recognised.

So those are my tips.

JAN: Great. I was just wondering actually - because I was trying to remember some of the key points in terms of working with men that you came up with. Maybe we can go through them, but I know one of the techniques is the broken mirror.

Shall we go through them?

DAVID: When I teach workshops I introduce with the male therapy glossary.

JAN: Oh great.

DAVID: Certain terms that everybody is going to be familiar with. One of them is 'The Broken Mirror' which is roughly interchangeable with the term of 'shame-ophobia' I was talking about, of really being hypersensitive to the possibility of feeling ashamed.

By the way, in other therapeutic orientations they might call that a susceptible delay to narcissistic injury, which those are all different ways of trying to say the same thing.

Another one is that term I talked about... some of the terms I talked about are strategies the 'distress tolerance' cultivating distress tolerance and recognising the independent centre of initiative of the other person.

It's also important to keep in mind one of the other terms I've mentioned called 'normative male alexithymia' which means the struggle that men have to put some of their internal experience into words - even words into their own head, let alone words with another person.

There's also the notion of making a distinction between moods and feelings and finding a way to understand the internal experience that just doesn't become a dark mood, but actually be able to label it as feelings and include another person into your world with that.

Those are some of the key things that I think is really important to keep in mind and the other tips I just mentioned were the importance of men having action plans and - I don't want to say formulas - but a structured approach to understanding what the problem is and what they're supposed to do about it.

That's very valuable working with men.

JAN: There is such a lot here, isn't there, about vulnerability and how to hold these vulnerable aspects in a very human way in order to not allow shame to begin to develop even further. Thank you so much for your time today.

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Author Bio

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