Mars Bars

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"Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus," relationship counselor John Gray proclaimed in 1992, in a book that has sold over seven million copies. Endowed with reciprocally different natures, Gray explained, women express their feelings and value assistance, while under stress men become distant and uncommunicative as they seek solutions to their problems.

Twenty years later, according to Michael Addis, a psychology professor at Clark University, the inner lives of most men "remain hidden from others and often from themselves" and men continue to pay a considerable cost for their silence that often manifests itself in loneliness, anxiety, despair and depression. Convinced that the differences between men and women on emotional and relational issues are grounded more in nurture than nature, Addis believes that under the right conditions "almost all men" want to share their emotional experiences. In *Invisible Men*, he examines "the causes of men's inner suffering." His goal is to help empower them to lower the bars of fear and shame they associate with intimacy.

At times, Addis stays too close to the surface, lapsing into self-help-speak. A puff on the back cover from former National Football League quarterback Terry Bradshaw does not inspire confidence in the book's gravitas. Nonetheless, *Invisible Men* is an informative and practical primer on an important topic.

Addis traces men's unwillingness to express feelings to social norms that are applied insistently in early childhood. Young male infants and toddlers, he reveals, may well be more emotional than their female counterparts, but are taught to be ashamed of their feelings and, in essence, to "man up." One study found a fifty percent decline in boys' expressions of sadness and anxiety from preschool to early school age.

In the 1960s and '70s, Addis acknowledges, "masculinity" was reconstructed, and it became unacceptable in some circles to assert that men should be "physically strong, emotionally stoic, self-reliant, powerful lovers." And yet, he writes, such beliefs remain common.

He may well be right. Our subjective impression, based on conversations with many young men, however, is that there are attitudinal and behavioral differences (in experiencing and expressing emotions) among baby boomers, Gen-Xers, and millenials. And that many twenty and thirty-somethings are less inclined than their fathers to conclude that expressing a desire for closeness or revealing something personal are "potential risks for being shamed or otherwise rejected..."

In any event, Addis does not make substantive suggestions for challenging or changing still dominant norms of masculinity. But he does make some useful recommendations to assist individuals in identifying and addressing their hidden suffering.

Friends, significant others, and therapists might begin, he indicates, by expressing concern, acknowledging that it is not helpful for anyone to dump every little problem on others, and asking the individual how often, and for how long, he has sought help from a potential source of support in the last month. The questions can often be a revelation. It led one of Addis' patients to admit that he had often wondered whether he was a lot more private than other men.

Spouses might also stop blaming men for having difficulty with emotional intimacy and stop believing that they are "wired differently." By seeing, hearing and empathizing with the man's struggles, and by spending time with things that bring a couple closer, whether they involve talking or doing, Addis claims, spouses can reduce or eliminate distancing, squabbling, and "the demand-withdrawal pattern."

It is important as well, Addis points out, that men understand that medications need not be addictive -- and are not a cop-out for those who cannot handle their problems on their own. Nor are drugs or talk therapy the only effective ways to address depression, anxiety, or existential crises. Self-help, exercise, social support, and (perhaps surprisingly) writing about one's experiences can be enormously helpful.

More globally, Addis cautions that mental health services in the United States "are not typically designed with traditional masculinity in mind." Since men often have an aversion to "therapy," services need to be packaged and presented differently. Addis singles out the "Real Men Real Depression" public information campaign of the National Institutes of Health and points to the Men's Shed movement in Australia, which enlists groups of men to rebuild abandoned buildings, which then serve as centers in which they share thoughts and feelings.
Having seen, at close range, the painful and pernicious impact of suppressed feelings, we believe that many men are in a dehumanizing trap that is comparable, in a sense, to the "problem that has no name" identified fifty years ago by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. We realize, of course, that men aren't an oppressed class, in need of liberation -- and that Michael Addis is not Betty Friedan. We applaud him, however, for taking one small step toward bringing the men of Mars back to Earth.

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