NO ONE HIDES LIKE GASTON

Candace Morey, LMHC

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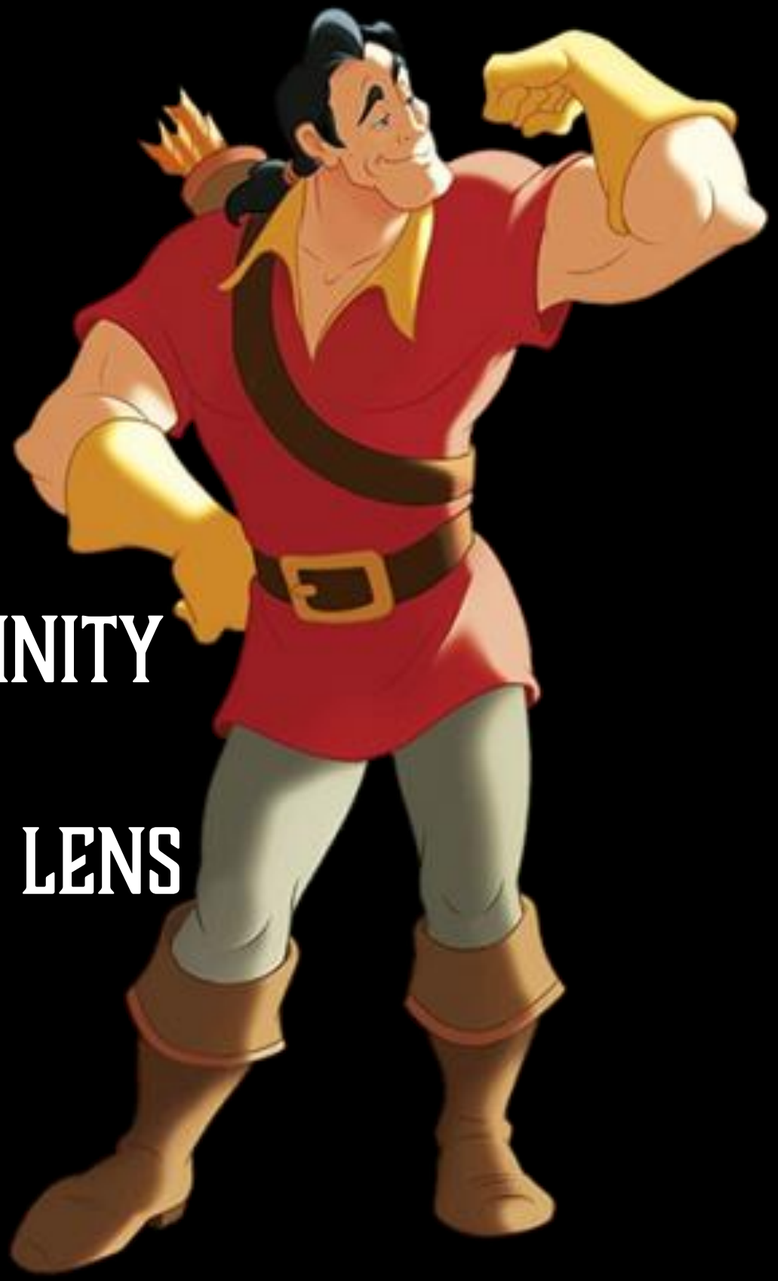

EXPLORING TOXIC MASCULINITY
AND MALE LONELINESS
THROUGH AN INNER CHILD LENS

Candace Morey, LMHC

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Identify common psychological patterns and defense mechanisms in male clients that stem from early attachment wounds and socialized masculinity norms.
2. Understand how toxic masculinity perpetuates emotional disconnection and relational dysfunction, and recognize evidence-based interventions to address these patterns.
3. Apply inner-child focused, trauma-informed interventions to help male clients reconnect with authenticity, emotions, and authentic self-expression.

WHY THIS MATTERS: THE EPIDEMIC OF MALE LONELINESS

Social Isolation Crisis

25% of men report feeling lonely daily

Men are somewhat more likely to be socially isolated than women--reporting they are “not meaningfully part of any group/community.

WHY THIS MATTERS: THE EPIDEMIC OF MALE LONELINESS

Friendship Recession

Men ages 18-30 have fewer close friends than any previous generation

15% of men have no close, which is a five-fold increase since 1990

Average number of close friends for men: 6 (1985) 2 (2021)

Time spent with friends has decreased by 20+ hours/month since 2000

WHY THIS MATTERS: THE EPIDEMIC OF MALE LONELINESS

Suicide

Men die by suicide 4x more often than women (2023, ASFP)

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for men ages 15-34 (2023, NIMH)

Lonely men:

- 29% increased risk of heart disease
- 32% increased risk of stroke
- Higher rates of substance abuse, depression, and anxiety

THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLL

Loneliness in men isn't a character flaw - it's a **predictable outcome** of how we socialize boys

It's reinforced by **childhood trauma patterns**

It's amplified by **cultural messages** about masculinity

And it shows up in our therapy offices **disguised as anger, addiction, or relationship problems**

MEET GARY

BUILDING A GASTON

ACEs: THE FOUNDATION OF THE FORTRESS

ACEs Overview:

- 10 categories of childhood adversity
- 61% of adults experienced at least one ACE; 16% experienced 4+
- Slightly higher rates for men in certain categories (physical abuse, household substance abuse, incarceration)

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Higher ACE Scores Correlate With:

- **Greater adherence to harmful masculine norms** (suppressing emotions, avoiding help-seeking)
- **Increased aggression and violence** (especially with certain ACE types)
- **Higher rates of substance abuse** (self-medication + masculine norm of drinking)
- **Relationship dysfunction** (avoidant attachment patterns)

MALE LONELINESS PATHWAY

LONELINESS PATHWAY

Childhood trauma

Disrupted attachment

Can't trust caregivers = Can't trust others

Emotional dysregulation

Never learned to process feelings safely

Hypervigilance

Always scanning for danger, can't relax into connection

Avoidant Coping Strategies

Isolation feels safer than vulnerability

Poor social skill development

Missed critical periods for learning intimacy

Adult Loneliness

TOXIC MASCULINITY PATHWAY

TOXIC MASCULINITY PATHWAY

Childhood trauma

→ Shame + vulnerability

Something is wrong with me & I can't show weakness

↙

Hypermasculine compensation

If I can't be safe, I'll be strong

↙

Rigid gender role adherence

Following the "man rules" obsessively for safety/identity

↙

Emotional suppression as strategy

Feelings = weakness = danger

↙

Dominance-based relationships

Control feels safer than intimacy

↓

Toxic Masculinity Patterns

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Attachment Theory Meets Gender Socialization:

- **Alternative masculine role models** (coaches, teachers, mentors who model healthy masculinity)
- **Safe spaces for emotional expression** (even one relationship where feelings were okay)
- **Community connection** (teams, groups, activities that provide belonging)
- **Therapeutic intervention** (early mental health support)
- **Cultural/family contexts** that allow broader masculine expression

RAISING A GASTON

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

The Family Classroom

- Big boys don’t cry
- Be tough
- Man up
- Boys will be boys (excusing aggression while punishing gentleness)
- Be the man of the house (inappropriate responsibility)

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Research

- Parents comfort crying girls **40% more often** than crying boys
- Boys receive **more physical punishment** than girls for same behaviors
- Fathers spend less time in emotional conversations with sons than daughters
- By age 5, boys have learned that certain emotions are "off-limits"

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

School/Peer Enforcement (K-5)

- Boys who cry = bullying targets
- Playing with girls = cooties/gay
- Showing fear = weakness = social death
- Physical toughness = social currency
- Teachers often reinforce: "Use your words" for girls, "boys will be boys" for boys

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Middle School (6-8)

- Most intense period of masculine norm enforcement
- "That's so gay" becomes the ultimate insult
- Homophobia polices ALL gender non-conformity
- Interest in arts, emotions, or academics = suspect
- Hypermasculine performance becomes survival strategy

THE PURGE

What Boys Must Abandon

- Crying
- Emotional vocabulary

THE PURGE

What Boys Must Abandon

- **Physical Affection with Males**
- Driver: homophobia
- Consequence: Touch starvation
- Long-term: Access to touch is only through romantic/sexual relationships

THE PURGE

Interest in “girl stuff”

- Arts (dancing, singing, drawing, theatre – unless sports adjacent)
- Certain colors (pink, purple)
- Certain activities (caregiving, domestic skills)
- Academic interests (English)
- Emotional content in media (romance)

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Research - Middle School (6-8)

- Boys report **significantly more pressure** to conform to gender norms than girls
- Masculine norm violations punished more severely than feminine norm violations for girls
- Peers enforce masculinity more rigidly than adults
- Social rejection has neurological pain response identical to physical pain

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Sports Culture – Positive Aspects

- Teamwork, discipline, goal-setting
- Physical confidence
- Mentorship opportunities
- Belonging and identity

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Sports Culture – Shadow Side

- **Pain is weakness:** "Rub some dirt on it," "Walk it off"
- **Emotions are liabilities:** "There's no crying in baseball"
- **Winning = worth:** Your value is your performance
- **Bodies are machines:** Ignore pain signals, push through injury

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Sports Culture – Toxic Coaching

- Shaming players to motivate ("Don't be a pussy," "My grandmother hits harder")
- Gendered insults ("You play like a girl")
- Emotional suppression as discipline
- Homophobic language to enforce aggression

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Masculine Archetypes Everywhere

- The **Stoic Hero** (doesn't talk, just acts)
- The **Lone Wolf** (doesn't need anyone)
- The **Ladies' Man** (worth measured by sexual conquests)
- The **Protector** (worth = ability to defend)
- The **Provider** (worth = resources)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

The Implicit Messages

- Real men solve problems with action, not words
- Real men don't need emotional support
- Real men are invulnerable
- Real men are sexually successful with multiple partners
- Real men hide their humanity

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Video Game Culture

- Average boy/young man: **6–8 hours per week gaming** (some much more)
- 90% of boys play video games regularly
- Gaming is the **primary leisure activity** for young men

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Video Game Culture – Positives

- **Community and belonging** (guilds, clans, teams)
- **Achievement and mastery** (clear goals, progression)
- **Social connection** (online friends can be real friends)
- **Stress relief and escape**

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

Toxic Video Game Culture

- Substitution for real-world connection
- Extreme homophobia, misogyny, racism in voice chats
- "Git gud" mentality (shaming weakness)
- Women gamers harassed relentlessly
- Competitive environment punishes mistakes brutally
- Violent content normalization

BOYHOOD BOOTCAMP

The Radicalization Pipeline

- Gaming communities overlap heavily with **manosphere content**
- YouTube algorithm: gaming videos → Jordan Peterson → Andrew Tate
- Discord servers become recruitment grounds
- GamerGate as radicalizing moment (2014)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Pornography

- Average age of first exposure: 11-12 years old
- By age 18: 93% of boys have viewed pornography
- Most exposure is accidental initially, then becomes regular use
- Average young man views porn 2-3 times per week

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

What Porn Teaches Boys

- Sex is performance
- Women's pleasure is performative
- Emotional connection is absent
- Consent is implied
- Aggression is normative
- Bodies are commodified

TRADITIONAL MEDIA - PORN

The Masculinity Connection

- Reinforces **dominance-based sexuality**
- Creates **performance anxiety** (real sex doesn't match script)
- Reduces **empathy and relationality** in sexual encounters
- Teaches: **Masculine success = sexual prowess**
- Normalizes **dehumanization** (especially of women)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA - PORN

Research

- More adversarial sexual beliefs
- Greater acceptance of violence against women
- Lower relationship satisfaction
- Higher rates of sexual aggression
- Reduced empathy

TRADITIONAL MEDIA - PORN

Clinical Reality

- Unrealistic sexual expectations
- Inability to be present during partnered sex
- Porn-induced erectile dysfunction
- Shame about porn use (but don't know how to stop)
- Viewing habits that escalate over time
- Difficulty connecting sex with intimacy

THE
MASK
YOU
LIVE
IN

HEALING GASTON

ESTABLISHING SAFETY & TRUST

- The therapeutic container provides the safety necessary for vulnerable inner child work.
- Consistent Presence
- Boundaries & Structure
- Attunement & Validation
- Rupture & Repair

INNER CHILD WORK/RECONNECTION

Clinical Techniques

Accessing the Inner Child

Guided imagery, dialoguing, letter writing, and somatic exploration to connect with younger self-states

Reparenting Work

Emotional Integration

Somatic Awareness

Narrative Reconstruction

INNER CHILD WORK/RECONNECTION

Clinical Techniques

Needs identification

Parts work and identification

Portrait therapy/Photo work

CHALLENGING MASCULINITY NORMS

Common Barriers

- ✓Intellectualization as defense
- ✓“That wasn’t that bad.”
- ✓Anger instead of vulnerability
- ✓I don’t remember
- ✓Shame-based shutdown
- ✓Activity over introspection
- ✓Resistance through caretaking
- ✓Skepticism about the process

CHALLENGING MASCULINITY NORMS

Working with Resistance

- ✓Name it, normalize it
- ✓Pace appropriately
- ✓Reframe inner child work in masculine terms
- ✓Validate the protector parts
- ✓Use psychoeducation
- ✓Start with external before internal

EXPLORING RELATIONAL DYSFUNCTION

Patterns and Pathways to Change

Childhood relational wounds manifest as adult attachment patterns and relationship difficulties.

Identifying Patterns

Working Through

Building New Capacities

Integration

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