TALKING MAN TO MAN: AN INFORMAL MEN’S DISCUSSION GROUP

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“We search for our own stories in the stories of others.”

While uncertain as to whether our men’s group developed over the last seven years at the George Hull Centre for Children & Families qualifies as a model, we do have a story to tell. The story involves how our determination to include men in our work with children, families and communities has evolved over the years into a men’s discussion group called Talking Man To Man: An Informal Men’s Discussion Group. The history of this group embraces a patchwork quilt of redefining mandates, ever-changing communities, guiding principles, theoretical concepts and character-rich participants.

In the early 90s, The George Hull Centre expanded and transformed a small infant mental health program into a comprehensive, community-based, prevention and early intervention service for families with children 0 to 6 years old. We were interested in expanding the context of our work with families to include the communities in which they were situated. To achieve this meant integrating a continuum of programs from treatment to community development, with an emphasis on health promotion, parenting and parent-child interaction groups. It also meant undertaking community development outreach to the population at large, with an emphasis on families deemed to be at risk. This led to ever-increasing collaborative projects with diverse community partners. As these initiatives were being established, we became increasingly aware of (and uncomfortable with) the continued absence of fathers in any significant way. While fathers were clearly around, we continued to remain uninviting to them. Although many women valued the safe and empowering environment that sprung up in these de facto women-only programs, we were now faced with a new challenge — to develop a social inclusion approach towards men without women losing their safety and their say.

In response to these concerns (i.e., including men, safeguarding women’s gains) we decided to offer a group for men only. The challenge was to find a way to make the invitation inviting. More questions arose: “What for? Who to invite? What kind of group?” We mulled these questions for months...

What for? Because we see children living in communities (and not just families), we expanded our interest to explore the mental health impact of diverse and sometimes conflicting societal beliefs of male socialization. We wanted to create a milieu in which we could discuss ideas about being men and at the same time be helpful in a practical way to those men struggling interpersonally with their loved ones. We also suspected that men attending a talk group might initially struggle with the limiting male-model image of staying strong and silent, a norm embedded in the socially-constructed sense of masculinity with its emphasis on self-reliance and emotional containment. How, then, could we reduce men’s restrictive shame as they tried to share long-felt and long-held fears, worries, weaknesses, wonderings and words? From the onset, it seemed evident that issues of vulnerability and inter-dependence would be central and crucial themes for any men-only group.

While the group would be male-focused, it was our expectation that the work would also be feminist-informed. To us, this meant that although men often experience themselves as powerless and confused in the face of women’s new-found voice, it would be important to point out instances of gender dominance emanating from privileges and advantages that a patriarchal culture has afforded men. Our thought at the present time is that gender-power imbalances are not only the source of collective domination over women (and the source of much pain in women’s lives), but that these power imbalances are also an often unrecognized source of our own male pain as well.

How men father their children has become a central theme in the group. Our approach, however, has not evolved so much from a perspective of imparting and enhancing parenting skills, or emphasizing the need of children for their fathers, but rather from the perspective of men’s need for fathering. In 1995, William Pollack (supported by Barnett, Marshall & Pleck, 1992; Levant, 1990) reflected that “good enough fathering” (as Winnicott might have termed it) is more than just an important factor in the healthy development of young children. It is also “an important curative or transforming factor in the mental health of adult men.” Terence Real (1997) points out that men, having lost the importance of the relational in their lives, have also lost the ability to “father,” “to take care of.” He writes, “Studies indicate that while fathering...
Whom do we invite? Men come from many corners of our community. Some are men who are curious about what talking man-to-man might entail. Others are fathers encountered through our outreach Early Years programs (including door-to-door knocking). Many who are struggling with interpersonal or family problems, are referred by local service providers, including children’s aid societies and local children’s mental health centres. To reach the widest possible population, we advertise through our two community newspapers and distribute flyers throughout the Etobicoke Brighter Futures Coalition and mainstream health and social service agencies. The idea was to position our group within the larger picture of health promotion — away from a more restrictive problem-based and pathology-driven context.

What kind of group is it? As typical Canadians, we have a much easier time stating what Talking Man to Man isn’t than describing just what it is. For example, it is not a therapy group, however it can be therapeutic; not a support group, however the environment is supportive; not a psycho-educational group, however much of what is discussed is educational. At present, Talking Man to Man is an informal discussion group led by two male clinical social workers. The group meets for two hours on an early-evening weekday for 10 consecutive weeks. There is no fee for this service. With an attrition rate of 25% (usually in the first 3 weeks), it is prudent to start with a roster of 12-15 men. The group is open for two to three weeks while men decide whether they want to stay the course.

During these initial meetings, new members join. By the end of the third week the group’s membership is closed. Our experience has been that the optimal number of participants is between 8 and 12 men. When the numbers swell to more than twelve, each man’s “share of the air” starts to feel too small, resulting in less intense discussions. This is especially important later on in the group when participants have become more comfortable and willing to risk sharing more intimate information about their lives.

On the first night, the co-leaders lay out ground rules and direct the discussion in order to provide both a skeletal structure and a sense of safety. Our ground rules are deliberately few and familiar e.g., respect others and their point of view, preserve confidentiality, and turn off cell phones. One important rule has become the trademark of our group: you are not permitted to reveal the nature of your occupation. This rule was established in our first group by asking each of the men to introduce themselves in relation to significant people in their lives and not in relation to what they do for a living. The impact of this rule was twofold. First, it immediately compelled the men to define themselves through their relationships with significant others (their fathers, wives, children, friends.) As we anticipated, significant women were found to be a strong influence on these men’s decisions to attend the group. A second impact, not consciously anticipated, was the kind of socioeconomic leveling it created in the culture of the group. After all, men measure. But how can you size yourself up or down if you do not know whether the guy beside you is a lawyer or a truck driver? (Both occupations have been represented in the group.)

Comments from a Participant in Talking Man To Man

Joe Rankin, Father

I am a repeat participant in the Man-to-Man Programs at The George Hull Centre. I’m a father of two teenage girls, aged 18 and 16. I found an ad in the local paper right at the time in my life when I was repeating in my head over and over again. What am I going to do? Don’t know… What am I going to do??… Debt. Despair. Depression. My financial, spiritual, emotional, professional, marital and relationship with my kids, accounts were at an all time low. I found that getting together with a group of men and talking about our similar problems was much better than the usual male solution — drown your sorrows in a bar, or ignore them. It was helpful to find that things weren’t that bad compared to others and someone in the room had come through similar situations. In the group we were able to focus on a particular topic to start the sessions and were then allowed to move off in the direction we felt good in. I think Daniel and Jess were surprised by how much feeling we guys were able to express and it surprised the guys as well — men don’t talk to each other that way. I have enjoyed each man-to-man session I’ve been in and eagerly await the next one as a man who hates to see kids having kids and kids killing kids.

I feel that a large reason for the decay in our society is the lack of fathers in the lives of their kids. These group sessions should be mandatory for men.

Our experience has been that framing the discussion in the form of questions works well. Typical first night ice-breaker questions might be: “How would your father introduce you to the other men in the group?” What qualities would he say you two shared and what other qualities would he identify as being yours alone (and if you don’t know, guess)? “At what age did you first start thinking of yourself as a ‘man’ and not as a ‘boy,’ and what changed?” or “Among your family and friends, who most supports you attending this group and why?” and “Who would be most surprised and why?” In this way, right from the start, we introduce curiosity about the relational aspect in men’s lives.

As the weeks progress, certain themes emerge from the participants and those issues begin to shape both the form and function of the evening’s discussion. Topics include subjects as...
diverse as male anger (its origin, impact and usefulness in masking deeper, less accessible emotions), depression, relationships with children/spouses/friends/family of origin, vulnerability, parenting, work, substance abuse, feelings of disconnection, social inclusion, shame and loss. Men come wanting to make significant changes in their lives. Examples include placing more priority on nurturing their young children, being less under the tyranny of their own anger, making space for more intimate male friendships, attending more fully to their partners’ emotional needs, and re-establishing relationships with children whom they seldom or no longer see.

Over time, the initiative for discussion becomes shared more evenly between participants and co-leaders. We lead not as men with answers, but as men equally struggling with redefining masculinity, willing to expose our own vulnerabilities and uncertainties. When needed, we revisit themes we have found useful in previous groups. And, as mentioned above, though not a therapy group, we encourage the sharing of personal stories, sometimes with a check-in go-around. As co-leaders, we try to extract from individual stories some semblance of theme that can then be discussed by all.

In ending the group, we elicit some evaluative feedback from the participants through questions, such as, “What stood out for you in your participation in the group over the last 10 weeks?” or “What impact did this group have on the significant relationships in your life?” Other questions include, “What was useful and what was not-so-useful in what took place here and how it was led?” The response has been quite positive. “We talk about stuff we usually never talk about anywhere else” is a typical feedback comment (see insert from father on previous page). As well, most participants report stories about how it changed the way they relate to family members, friends and co-workers. As to the content, structure and leadership of the group, the feedback ranges from wanting a little more structure including a set agenda of topics, to leaving it totally open ended with spontaneous emerging of discussions. The majority favoured a happy medium, which is what we try to establish. Normally we offer the group twice yearly, in the spring and fall. The participants are welcome to return to the next group. The small number who do return help to create the right ambiance for the next group.

Participants in the Talking Man to Man group describe it as an opportunity to talk with other men in a safe, supportive and candid way. Various service providers who work with children and families (e.g. family therapists, early childhood educators, child welfare workers) find the group to be a good complement to their own work. And while it is not possible for us to know whether the men in each group will go on to live “happily-ever-after,” we are encouraged that the group remains a popular service offered by our agency to the local community.

References