

What Men Hate About Psychotherapy



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Today's Agenda

- Male biology: testosterone, flooding, emotional intelligence
- What men hate about therapy
- How to engage men in therapy
- Clinical supervision: case presentation

My Background in Men's Groups

- 1972: feminism - gender studies
- 1974: consciousness raising groups
- 1990: mythopoetic groups
- 1994: interactional groups
- 1998: transpersonal groups

Testosterone

- 1935: mice testicles; resembles cholesterol; produced in testicles-ovaries-adrenal glands
- men produce 10-20 x as much as women
- effects physique, behavior, mood, and self-understanding

Testosterone

- (when it is injected)”... a deep surge of energy... attention span shortens... harder to concentrate... want to exercise more... wit and mind quicker but judgment is more impulsive... I feel braced, but for what??? it scarcely seems to matter... and then, there’s the anger...”

Testosterone: Animal Behavior

- inject newborn female rats:
 - ★ developed penises
- inject mute female finches:
 - ★ began singing
- blocked in male rats:
 - ★ withering penises
- hyenas in female-run clans: higher levels in the females than the males

Testosterone: Animal Behavior

- the point: “typical” male behavior corresponds to testosterone levels whether exhibited by chromosomal males or females

Testosterone: Human Behavior

- effects: energy, self-confidence, competitiveness, tenacity, strength, sexual drive; some anti-depressant effect
- 1997 study of men and women: 'high testosterone people: more arousal and tension... more thinking, especially about concrete problems in the immediate present.. wanting to get things done and felt frustrated when they could not... mentioned friends more than family or lovers'

Testosterone production in the body:

- dependent on external circumstances: elevated in combat, confrontations, and sexual situations; decreased by stress
- correlations (both men & women): psychological dominance, confident physicality, high self esteem; higher in midshipmen than in plebes, in butch than in femme lesbians, in women who work than women who stay home; in blue collar than white collar workers

Differences: environmental?

- social context matters
- people watching sports events have testosterone rise when backing the winning side: levels fall when team loses
- men in long term marriages: levels fall
- men single: levels higher
- high levels correlate with failed marriages

Testosterone

- facilitates risk: physical, criminal, personal, professional
- not synonymous with gender
- not so simple as 'he needs to hunt'
- core: to risk, to act, strut, dare, seize, energy, foolishness, beauty... and how to channel that towards constructive ends is the question

Emotions

- older paradigms: don't be contaminated: 'put it behind me' 'don't wallow' 'let to of it
- later paradigms: express and be rid of: 'venting' 'catharsis'
- newer paradigms: repeated practice of aware emotions and intellectual functioning: 'self-awareness, self-expression, self-containment'
- neither wimp nor barbarian

Flooding

- “flooding” is the term used for susceptibility to frequent emotional distress
- a measure of heart rate
- feeling overwhelmed by partner’s negativity and one’s own reaction to it
- being swamped by dreadful out of control feelings and distorted hearing and thinking and clouded reasoning

Men and Flooding

- more prone than women to react at a lower intensity of negativity
- more prone than women to react to spousal criticism than women
- once flooded: adrenaline flow triggered by even lower levels of partner negativity

Men and Flooding

- it takes men longer to recover physiologically from flooding than women
- ‘stonewalling’ may be a defense against flooding
- note: as men stonewall, women become more critical, often pursuing their learned roles as emotional managers in a marriage

Emotional Regulation

- specific brain frontal-lobe connections regulate emotions, where the prefrontal lobes meet the amygdala (where emotional memory lives)
- emotional intelligence refers to a capacity in five basic domains of emotional regulation

Emotional Regulation

- recognizing one's emotion as it happens (self-awareness)
- managing and calming oneself (self-soothing)
- mobilizing and delaying oneself (motivating and delaying self-gratification)
- recognizing emotion in others (empathy)
- interpersonal intelligence (social analysis; organizing groups; negotiating solutions)

Emotional Intelligence Results

- to mobilize
- to persist in the face of adversity
- control impulses/delay gratification
- regulate mood
- keep distress from swamping cognition
- empathy and hope

Theorizing about High EI Traits

- social poise
- outgoing
- cheerful
- capacity for commitment
- taking responsibility
- sympathetic
- assertive
- express feelings appropriately
- adapt well to stress
- playful
- rare anxiety, guilt, ruminations

What Men Hate About Therapy

Men Are Coerced to Attend

- 70% of my clients are men
- 75% of them are coerced by their wives, girlfriends, courts, parents, workplace, etc.
- therapy became an arm of social control
- I make it clear I am not a party to this
- reluctance, resentment, mistrust are welcomed

Conventional Male Traits are Reversed

- ★ inner life over outer life
- ★ secrets are revealed
- ★ verticality is proposed
- ★ emotion is acknowledged
- ★ impulsivity is frowned upon
- ★ failures and fears are acknowledged
- ★ dreams are revealed
- ★ responsibility is urged

Emotions are Provoked

- ★ resentment at being coerced to participate
- ★ fears of making things worse
- ★ anger at what they are told
- ★ shame of being exposed
- ★ contempt for the therapist
- ★ envy for the practitioner
- ★ anxiety triggered by the topics

Nothing Happens There

- the therapist was silent a lot
- she sided with my wife
- she freaked out when I told her about....
- he was a clown - it was a joke - I learned nothing - I forgot our discussions
- I gained information but not capacity: “I seemed unable to master the things I disliked about myself”
- implausible solutions simplistically proposed

Countertransference

- demonizing intoxication, never speaking of responsible use (aka “harm reduction”)
- interpreting everything as psychological in nature
- avoiding issues regarding aggression, sexuality, risk-taking, spontaneity
- a failure to empathize with the man’s vast sense of powerlessness
- stereotyping all men as ‘powerful, privileged’

Counter-therapeutic Methods

- a cool, disappointingly-appropriate therapist
- a theory or a style that is foreign and unintelligible with linguistic complication
- labels, boxes, types, pigeonholes
- ignoring mister-sygonistic remarks
- uses words: (quoting a client's father) "you like to read? that makes you a faggot!"
- trying to control the client's behavior

Counter-therapeutic Methods

- blaming the client for resisting participation
- emphasizing right-brained efforts (symbols, metaphors, intuition, dreaming, emotions)
- failing to be alert regarding the male client's adaptations to your interventions
- failing to work with the relationship in the room, fearing sexual or aggressive transference
- being too casual about attendance, cancellations, therapeutic frame, treatment plan

Counter-therapeutic Methods

- theories that are abstract, remote, academic, OR are insufferably ephemeral or magical
- poorly-drawn psycho-educational 'step-wise' methods that do not generate the outcome
- always placing family responsibilities over work responsibilities
- demands that feelings always be verbalized
- emphasizes 'performance'
- blames only the male for marital dysfunction

Therapeutic Failures

- Failing to attend to the aggressions of the male's partner
- Failing to attend to the language of blame from a partner:
 - “I feel (abused) (betrayed) (unsafe) (abandoned), etc.”
- Failing to attend to the specific cultural realities that the man presents
- Assuming that ethnicity equals culture

Cultural Confusions about Mental Illness

- the voters equate it with diabetes as a health issue
- the politicians confuse it with crime and violence
- superstars 'go to rehab'
- we reward narcissistic CEO's
- 'the institutionalized denial of experience'
- simplistic generalizations about men and women
- we do not encourage conscious self-evolution

Money for Nothin'

- mental health insurance used to 'pay' for psychotherapy: but benefits have been reduced by 54% from 1988 to 1998
- 1989: mental health care received 9% of the total health insurance dollar; 1997 5%; 2004: 1.6%
- disrupt the work day and embarrass me
- work mates are hostile; security clearance?
- therapy ideas speak poorly of my pleasures and my independence
- see also: US Armed Forces and PTSD