



MASCULINITY AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Activity Guide

This guide provides background information and prompts for further discussion around the *Bodies, Hearts, and Minds* toolkit activity ‘Masculinity, Emotions, and Wellbeing’. It may be useful when running the activity with groups.

You can also find associated ‘Learning Objectives and Curriculum Links’ that can be used to support teaching on topics related to personal, social, health, and wellbeing education in England (4.1), Wales (4.2), Scotland (4.3), and Northern Ireland (4.4) on the [Body, Self, and Family website](#).

CONTENTS

- 2-5** **Background:** A (very) brief history of masculinity & emotions in the 20th century UK
- 6-9** **Activity:** Masculinity, Emotions, and Wellbeing



A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF MASCULINITY & EMOTIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY UK

Between the Victorian era and the 1960s, popular *ideals* of gender roles remained remarkably stable. Men were the main breadwinners. They had responsibility for the financial and material wellbeing of families – at the most basic level, ensuring that the family had somewhere to live, and enough to eat. Women were responsible for the physical and emotional wellbeing of families – making sure husbands and children were healthy and happy. In this model, men were the heads of families, and women and children were their dependants.

These ideal gender roles never matched the reality for most people. At some points they clashed sharply with reality. In both world wars, for instance, millions of women entered the workforce to fill the jobs vacated by men who had joined the armed forces. In the depression of the interwar years, millions of men were unemployed, and therefore unable to fulfil the breadwinner role. But although the reality frequently did not conform to expectations, the *ideal* of rigid gender roles remained strong. These ideals influenced people's lives in many ways. It was often thought that there was no point in educating girls beyond a certain level because they would just grow up, get married, have babies, and leave the workforce. The assumption of heterosexuality as the norm contributed to stigmatising LGBTQ+ people – or anyone else who stepped outside these rigid gender sexual and gender roles.

Gender ideals therefore powerfully influenced how boys and girls, and men and women, were supposed to think, act, and feel. Boys, in training

as responsible breadwinners, were encouraged to suppress their emotions. It was believed to be 'unmanly' to talk about feelings or to cry. Girls, on the other hand, were believed to be more 'naturally' emotional and unable to repress their feelings. These gendered ideas about emotion were a double-edged sword. Boys and men did not have the freedom to express their emotions – but they were also believed to be capable, rational, and objective. Girls and women could talk more freely about feelings – but only because they were perceived as weak, irrational, and unable to control themselves.

In the 1960s, these ideals started to be challenged by counter-cultural trends, especially among young people. The emphasis on liberation encouraged boys and men to be more in touch with their feelings and to express themselves more freely. This experimentation with new ways of being continued into the 1970s and 1980s. From David Bowie through to glam rock and the New Romantics, male pop stars played with gender identity in their self-presentation. Away from pop culture, in schools and workplaces, older gender ideals clung on. But these trends helped to pave the way for more widespread change in ideas about gender, emotion, and expression.

In the early 1980s, newspaper articles on the 'New Man' started to appear. The 'New Man' was supposed to be caring and sensitive, respectful to women, and keen to help with housework and childcare. The media invention of the 'New Man' reflected uncertainty about gender roles. From 1974, the oral contraceptive pill was made available free of charge to unmarried women. This contributed to changing patterns of sexual behaviour, reflected in declining birth rates and rising divorce

rates. The mirror image of the 'New Man' in the press was the 'Career Woman'. The [employment rate for women aged 25-54](#) rose from 57% in 1975 to 68% in 1990, with the increase concentrated in full-time employment. [Male unemployment](#) nearly quadrupled between 1971 and the peak in 1983, remaining high for the rest of the decade.

The high rate of male unemployment was not caused by the rise in women's employment. Oil crises in 1973 and 1979 limited the availability of oil, meaning that it skyrocketed in price. Large companies had to lay off their workers to contend with the increased costs, leading to increased unemployment. Inflation also rose significantly. Many businesses did not increase their wages to match inflation, leading to industrial unrest. The decline in the coal industry in the 1980s, caused by the closure of dozens of mines by Margaret Thatcher's government, also left tens of thousands without work. Nevertheless, newspapers and magazines often announced that women now 'had it all' – another media invention rather than reality, but powerful nonetheless.

The 'New Man' was a response to changing gender roles, but it never became an ideal. In the 1980s, media representations of the 'New Man' were likely to mock rather than praise his sensitivity. In the same way, 'Career Women' were often criticised for their selfishness and ambition. Old gender ideals remained strong. In the 1990s, there was a backlash against the 'New Man' and the 'Career Woman'. The 'lad culture' of the early 1990s celebrated men who were lazy, selfish, and one-dimensional, while 'ladette culture' celebrated women who lived up to stereotypical male fantasies. Nowadays, there is concern about [high levels of mental health problems among men](#). It is widely believed that men's inability to

speaking openly about emotions contributes to these mental health problems.



ACTIVITY: MASCULINITY, EMOTIONS, AND WELLBEING

Task

The activity asks participants to read a comic strip showing the thoughts of boys and girls about feelings and relationships. It is followed by discussion questions and an invitation to draw their own comic strip on talking about problems.

The activity encourages participants to think about:

- ✚ How, why, and to who they express their feelings;
- ✚ Stereotypes around gender and the expression of emotion;
- ✚ How ideas about “masculinity”, “men’s roles”, and emotions have changed since the 1980s.

Group leaders: The activity is simple but the topic of emotions might make some participants feel uncomfortable. They may experience more discomfort if they have difficult relationships with any friends or family members.

If participants seem unusually quiet, allow them to listen to the general discussion. The activity is still valuable if it prompts them to reflect. You might also depersonalise the topic by asking participants to discuss situations where they have seen people discussing feelings and problems on television or in films.

The comic strip is part of the material produced for the New Grapevine project. This project was run by the Family Planning Association, a registered charity that provides information on sexual health and wellbeing. The materials for this project were aimed at young people. The comic strip used in this activity encourages young people to think about how they express emotions with the intention of improving their relationships and decision-making around sex.

Participants might ask what is meant by the following terms:

- **Stereotypes:** Stereotypes are fixed ideas of a particular type of thing. They are often oversimplified. They can hide the complicated nature of reality.
- **Masculinity:** Masculinity means the qualities associated with men and boys. Popular ideas about masculinity often rely on stereotypes.
- **Men's roles:** Some people believe that men and women should have different roles in society. These beliefs are related to binary views of male and female "nature". People who hold these beliefs usually think men should earn money by working outside the home, while women should stay at home and look after children.

If participants do ask about these terms, you might ask follow-up questions, such as:

- ✚ Can you think of any popular stereotypes about "masculinity" and "femininity"?

- ✚ How do these stereotypes relate to ideas about “men’s roles” and “women’s roles”?
- ✚ Do these stereotypes make assumptions about what men and women are “really” like?
- ✚ Are there any problems with these stereotypes? Are they harmful in any way?

Participants may experience some practical difficulties with the task. The comic strip text is faint, and participants may have difficulty reading it.

Clockwise from top, the text for each box reads:

- ✚ No-one ever wanted to talk about problems. It just wasn’t done. So any problems you had, you just bottled up. *Image: two teenagers sitting, one with their back to the other, shown full-body length.*
- ✚ I’ve seen the wallpaper, I’ve seen it all. *Image: two teenagers facing each other, with a third person in the background.*
- ✚ I don’t think you’re capable of having a conversation with a girl. *Image: two teenagers sitting, shown half-body length.*
- ✚ Being gay, I just knew I was different. I just didn’t fit into those roles. *Image: close-up of face.*

Participants might also ask questions about the comic strip form, especially in terms of drawing their own. This guidance might help:

- ✚ Comic strips have a series of boxes. Each box tells a small part of the story.
- ✚ Comic strips often work best when there are only a few boxes, and the story is simple.

- ✚ Before starting to draw, think about the story you want to tell.
 - What are the different stages of this story?
 - Can each stage of the story be summed up in one box or image?
- ✚ How will the image work with the text?
 - Use speech bubbles to show what people in the image are saying.
 - Use thought bubbles to show what people in the image are thinking.
- ✚ A comic strip can be effective at showing:
 - When people sometimes say one thing, but think something else.
 - When two people are thinking completely different things.
 - When two people interpret the same thing differently.

'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ There are strong stereotypes around how boys and girls express emotion.
- ✚ These stereotypes have never simply reflected reality.
- ✚ Ideas about “masculinity” and “men’s roles” have changed a lot over time.
- ✚ Some elements of these ideas persist despite wider social changes.

