

S A P R O

Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Office



## Male Victims: Special Issues

Plenary Address by Jim Hopper, Ph.D.

McLean Hospital / Harvard Medical School



## Overview

- Male biology and emotions
- Socialization of males' emotions
- Emotional effects of abuse and assault
- Pre-service victimization
- Recruitment: Needs and hopes
- Boot camp & service: Conditioning and values
- Male victims in the military – Shattering trauma
- Implications: Male victims
- Implications: SARC responsibilities



## My Experience & Knowledge Base

- Therapist for men with sexual assault histories
  - 14 years as individual therapist
  - 3 years as group therapist
- Researcher
  - How masculine socialization shapes effects of abuse
  - Traumatic memories of child abuse and assault
  - Brain bases of emotion regulation in PTSD
  - Substance use for “self-medication” of PTSD
  - Psychological vs. medication treatment for PTSD
- Publisher of web page on male sexual abuse
  - 8 years #1 on Google for search phrases “male sexual abuse,” “sexual abuse of boys,” etc.
  - Thousands of emails from men around the world, seeking understanding and therapy referrals

3



## Male Biology and Emotions

- Male infants are biologically wired to be more emotionally reactive and expressive than females
  - Startle more easily
  - Excite more quickly
  - Less tolerance of tension and frustration
  - Distressed more quickly
  - Cry sooner and more often
- From age 2 onward, more physically active but less emotionally mature

4



## Gender Socialization of Emotion

From infancy into adulthood, males and females are conditioned to experience and respond to emotions very differently

- How parents respond to their emotions
- Responses from peers, games they play
- Responses from adults – teachers, coaches, etc.
- Media messages and role models



## Gender Socialization of Emotion

By middle of grade school boys are

- Less aware of their emotions
- Less expressive of their emotions
- Less empathic toward others – and themselves

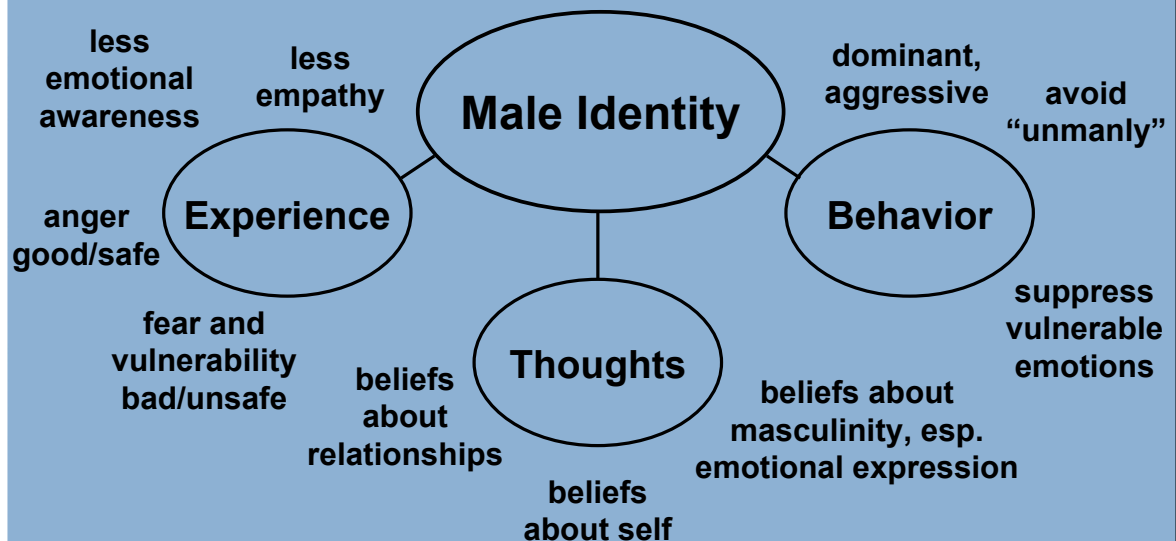


# Moral Values and Gender Identity

- Moral values: Good ways to be a \_\_\_\_\_
- We can't help but evaluate ourselves
  - “How close or far am I from how I should be?”
  - “Am I moving toward or away from my ideal self?”
- Brain circuitry of seeking valued goals
- Gender is moral, fundamental to identity



# Male Identity: Emotions and Values





## Conditioning & Masculine Identity

- Most conditioning is not conscious
- Conditioned to...
  - Not experience vulnerable emotions, but ignore them
  - Not express vulnerable emotions, but suppress them
  - Not empathize with vulnerable emotions, but fear and have contempt for them
  - Skip vulnerable feelings and go straight to anger



## Conditioning & Masculine Identity

- Thoughts and beliefs important, but not the core
- Conditioning wires and re-wires the brain
- Less emotional awareness, expressiveness, and empathy =  
Patterns of brain functioning



## Most Effective Conditioning

- High arousal
  - Intense positive or negative emotions
  - Threat to life or physical integrity (PTSD criterion)
  - Threat to moral identity
  - Brain chemicals that modulate learning and memory
- Deep needs
  - Safety
  - Respect and acceptance
  - Relationships and trust
  - Relationship with God / that seen as transcendent
  - To be a good \_\_\_\_\_, worthy of \_\_\_\_\_
- Repetition with clear rewards and punishments

11



## Assault as Emotional Conditioning

- Massive arousal: Memory (fragments) and emotions “burned into the brain”
- Basic needs: Safety, respect, relationships and trust
- Vulnerability: Fear, helplessness, humiliation, etc.

12



## Assault as Emotional Conditioning

- Outcomes, including PTSD
  - Reliving traumatic memories, emotions, body reactions
  - Automatic triggering by “associated stimuli”
  - Emotions as all-or-nothing, unregulated
  - Avoid reminders and triggers
  - Lose positive emotions and motivation to engage
  - Hyperarousal: Sleep problems, irritability, startle, etc.

13



## Assault Conditioning vs. Male Identity

- Experience and effects of assault, especially sexual assault, totally contradict male identity
  - Victim
  - Vulnerable
  - Submissive
  - Overwhelmed
  - Intense and inescapable emotions
- Normal male gender identity not an option
- Can shatter male identity – extreme negative beliefs and judgments about oneself
- How (try to) deal with the vulnerable emotions?

14



## Themes Shared with Female Sexual Assault Victims

- Fear
- Betrayal
- Helplessness
- Isolation and alienation
- Loss
- Negative beliefs about people
- Negative beliefs about oneself
- Problems with sexuality
- Self blame/guilt
- Shame/humiliation

Lisak, D. (1994). The psychological impact of sexual abuse: Content analysis of interviews with male survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 525-548.



## Themes and Beliefs Unique to Male Sexual Assault Victims

- Legitimacy
  - “Men can’t be sexual assault victims.”
  - “No one will believe me.”
- Masculinity issues
  - “I can’t be a real man if I let this happen to me.”
  - “My manhood has been destroyed, stolen from me.”
- Homosexuality issues
  - “Do I look gay?” “Am I gay?”
  - “Homosexuality is perverted and evil.”
  - Gay/bisexual: “Happened because I’m gay/bisexual?”

Lisak, D. (1994). The psychological impact of sexual abuse: Content analysis of interviews with male survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 525-548.



## Male Emotional Conditioning vs. Healing from Sexual Assault

“The culture’s rigid gender norms harmed these men beyond creating feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. They also impeded the process of healing from sexual abuse by forcefully warning survivors away from the very capacities they needed to foster their own healing. Like all males, survivors hear from numerous sources one of the codes of masculinity: ‘Don’t acknowledge your pain, don’t express it, and don’t talk about it with anyone else.’ Thus, they are compelled to reject their capacities to feel and empathize with their own pain, thereby dramatically reducing their ability to begin the process of healing the legacy of abuse.”

Lisak, D. (1994). The psychological impact of sexual abuse: Content analysis of interviews with male survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 525-548.



## Male Emotional Conditioning vs. Healing from Sexual Assault

### “Choice” aspect

- Option A: Challenge masculine norms, create own identity
- Option B: Become hyper-masculine
- Option C: Resigned to non-masculine identity



## Male Emotional Conditioning vs. Healing from Sexual Assault

### “Conditioning” aspect

- Beyond choice – beyond what you think or decide
- Emotional functioning is deeply conditioned, involves brain structures and processes outside of awareness
- Many men simply lack capacities to deal with strong vulnerable emotions
- With the right support and help, males can acquire the courage, strength, and skills needed to accept and deal with vulnerability



## Why Males Don't Seek Help

- Little public awareness, and even less acceptance, of males as victims of sexual abuse/assault
- Male identity/values: Weak and unmanly to...
  - Be victimized
  - Need help
  - Seek help
  - Talk about victimization
  - Share vulnerable feelings



## Pre-Military Sexual & Physical Abuse

- Abuse of boys by age 16
  - Physical: 25 to 35%
  - Sexual: 15 to 20%
- **For some, military service = Rescue, defend, prove their masculinity**
- Which service would you expect to have highest rate of childhood sexual abuse?



## Military Recruiting and Training – Masculinity, Emotions, Moral Values



Airforce.com – “Enlisted Basic Training” (underlines added)

“You'll work hard and be challenged, but we'll be with you every step of the way, as you stretch yourself and discover that you're capable of more than you ever thought possible. And when you're finished, you'll know that you're ready for anything that life can throw at you.”



## Military Recruiting and Training – Masculinity, Emotions, Moral Values

### Navy.com

- “During the Navy: Boot Camp”

“**Honor. Courage. Commitment.** Three words that before Boot Camp probably held little meaning. Here, they’ll become words you live by.”
- “During the Navy: Personal Development”

“**Honor, Courage and Commitment.** By embodying these qualities, you will build character and confidence, develop strong team skills, and learn to accept responsibility and accountability for personal actions.”



## Military Recruiting and Training – Masculinity, Emotions, Moral Values

### Army.com

- “Enlist: Is the Army Right for Me?”

“Only the Army strengthens you mentally, physically, and emotionally from day one, to meet and ultimately master any challenge – equipping you to do things you never thought you could do.”
- “Enlist: Do I Have What It Takes?”

“These seven values are the cornerstone of all the Army does today and all of its future successes. Army values form the foundation of a Soldier’s character. They are at the very core of every good Soldier and demand the highest moral standard without compromise, making better Soldiers and citizens.”



## Military Recruiting and Training – Masculinity, Emotions, Moral Values

### Marines.com

“Marines are the finest warriors in the world, and our nation depends on us. So there is simply no room for weakness.”

“Young men and women who come to the Marine Corps.... bring with them perceived limits, and learn to crush them.”

“Marine Recruits learn to... live as moral beings with real purpose.”



## Male Recruits' Needs and Hopes

- Give me caring authority figures (and the family I never had)
- Help me become a strong, competent, responsible, moral man
- Make me a super man who can conquer and “crush” any vulnerabilities
- Other needs and hopes resulting from past conditioning, including child abuse
- How focused on vulnerability? Manhood?



## Boot Camp

### Extremely intensive conditioning

- Near total control over daily behavior
- High arousal – physiological and emotional
- Appeal to fundamental needs and hopes
- Clear and strong rewards and punishments
- Repetitive drilling to automate new behaviors, especially unnatural and deadly ones



## Boot Camp

### Instills universally admired values and behaviors

- Courage
- Commitment
- Discipline
- Perseverance
- Loyalty



## Boot Camp

Also instills values and patterns of thought and behavior that...

- Enable men to risk their lives in combat, and kill others
- Fit with code of masculinity and its values
- Reinforce conditioning related to emotional vulnerability
  - Lack of awareness
  - Lack of expression
  - Lack of empathy



## Boot Camp

Conditions men to accept physical wounds, death, and killing – while leaving them unprepared for emotional wounds and assaults on male identity



## Military Service

- Reinforces boot camp conditioning
- Reinforces gender socialization of emotions
- For many, pre-enlistment masculinity focused needs and hopes are met
- Masculine identity and values – and success at realizing these – are supported by military culture, relationships, institutions, etc.



## A Crucial Fact About Conditioning

- New conditioning does not wipe out old conditioning
  - “Extinction” = Disappearance of a previously conditioned response to same old stimulus
  - Old learning is still there in the brain
  - New conditioning only inhibits expression of old
  - Huge amount of behavioral and brain research in animals and humans has shown this
- Under “right” conditions, old responses will return, with equal or greater intensity



## Implications for Males Sexually Assaulted in Military

- From birth, highly vulnerable to yet unprepared for emotional effects of sexual assault
- Conditioned to be less aware, less expressive, and less empathic toward vulnerable emotions
- Conditioned to embrace male role and values
- Enlisted partly to deal with masculinity, vulnerability
- Boot camp and service reinforced male conditioning
- Many “masculine needs” may have been met by military, but key capacities for dealing with sexual assault were not cultivated, even suppressed

33



## Implications for Males Sexually Assaulted in Military

Men sexually assaulted in military will likely...

- Be unprepared to deal with the vulnerable emotions
- Resist seeking help, and be ineffective at doing so
- Believe their hard-earned, soldier-based manhood has been “shattered,” “robbed,” “destroyed”

34



## Implications for Males Sexually Assaulted in Military

Men sexually assaulted in military will likely...

- Feel betrayed by military – the institution and people they counted on to support their successful manhood
- Feel isolated and alienated from peers, subordinates and superiors
- Have resurgence of pre-military insecurities related to masculinity, emotional vulnerability
  - and for many, victimization in childhood



## Implications for Males Sexually Assaulted in Military

Values and qualities military instills can promote recovery too

- Courage to face what happened
- Strength to address vulnerabilities
- Commitment to overcome conditioning
- Discipline to see through recovery
- Loyalty to self, fellow soldiers, country



## Implications for SARCs

### Education, training, advocacy responsibilities

- Understand and educate others about how gender socialization can shape male victims' post-assault emotions, beliefs, values, behaviors
- Understand and educate others about biases that can shape one's responses to male victims
  - Beliefs about men as victims
  - Beliefs about how men should seek help
  - Beliefs about how men should cope and recover
  - Responses to complex or "difficult" victims



## Implications for Victim Advocacy

### Strengthen existing skills, learn new ones

- Seeing uniqueness of each man
- Empathic listening
- Recognizing your conditioned biases
- Assessing past trauma, current symptoms and risk factors
- Offering options and supporting men to make their choices



## Seeing Uniqueness of Each Man

- Guard against over-generalizing from experiences with other men
  - Am I jumping to conclusions?
  - Am I thinking, “He’s just like \_\_\_\_\_”?
  - Am I thinking, “I have this guy figured out”?
- How consistent with gender conditioning?
  - Beliefs, values, identity, behavior
  - Capacities for emotional awareness, expressiveness, empathy
- Avoid stereotyping gay and bisexual men



## Empathic Listening

Most important: Remember how extremely difficult and courageous it is for him to...

- Disclose to you that he was assaulted
- Reveal his vulnerability, fear, pain, and posttraumatic symptoms
- Risk being misunderstood, judged, blamed, shamed, humiliated



## Empathic Listening

- Listening with genuine connection and respect can be extremely supportive, validating, healing – even if you initially “don’t know what to say”
- For some men, it is not empathic to focus on feelings



## Empathic Listening

- What are the underlying...
  - Feelings driving confusing or unhealthy behaviors?
  - Fears about seeking help, investigation process?
  - Beliefs about assault’s meaning, career implications?
- Listen for mixed feelings / ambivalence
  - About seeking help and treatment
  - About revealing feelings, fears, symptoms, beliefs
  - About making formal non-confidential report



## Empathic Listening

Advocate for him, but don't take sides in his internal struggles

- Common trap, esp. when it seems “obvious” what's best
- If you take one side, he'll usually take the other
- Lots of research shows: If you advocate for a healthy change that he has mixed feelings about, he will be less likely to make that change
- “Motivational Interviewing” - Formalized these principles in substance abuse field

43



## Recognizing Your Conditioned Biases

- Beliefs and myths about males have been conditioned into all of us
  - Males can't be victims of sexual assault
  - Weak and unmanly if assaulted, need help
  - Must be gay or have given off “homosexual signals”
- We fall back on myths and stereotypes when we feel overwhelmed, at a loss for how to help, or otherwise threatened

44



## Recognizing Your Conditioned Biases

- We all have personal biases, resulting from our own unique conditioning
- Who or what “pushes your buttons”?
  - Angry men?
  - Men who cry?
  - Depressed men?
  - Gay or bisexual men?
  - Men who try to cope with alcohol or drugs?
  - Men who say it’s happened to them before?



## Recognizing Your Conditioned Biases

What judging thoughts arise as you listen?

When your efforts to help are rejected, criticized, or seem useless?

- “How could he have let this happen?”
- “No wonder he got raped.”
- “He’s pathetic and weak.”
- “Why can’t he be stronger?”
- “Why can’t he just decide what to do?”



## Assessing Past Trauma, Current Symptoms and Risk Factors

- Ask about prior abuse and chronic trauma
  - Sexual or physical abuse, neglect, bullying
  - Betrayal by family members or authorities – as perpetrators or negligent bystanders
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts, intentions, plans
- Substance abuse
- Sleep problems
- Sexual problems
- Anger, hostility, risk of violence



## Assessing Past Trauma, Current Symptoms and Risk Factors

### Look for signs of complex trauma

- Acting like it didn't happen
- Not protecting self from further harm
- Significant memory problems, inconsistent reports
- Major problems in work relationships
- Deliberate self-destructive behaviors



## Assessing Past Trauma, Current Symptoms and Risk Factors

Listen for motives and causes behind complex trauma behaviors

- Attempts at control
- Inability to manage intense emotions and physiological arousal
- Dissociation
- Extreme distrust
- Reenactment of abuse dynamics



## Offering Options and Supporting Men to Make Choices

- Don't assume how assault response or recovery process "must" or "should" be for male victims
- What a man will need, or be capable of, in short- and long-term, can depend on many factors
  - Is he suffering from simple or complex trauma?
  - Does he have a supportive partner, CO, friends, family?
  - What treatment and other resources are available here and now?



## Offering Options and Supporting Men to Make Choices

Men will contradict your assumptions about recovery process

- May need or decide to block out feelings, at least initially
- May lack capacities for addressing certain key feelings and meanings – but still experience some recovery
- May not want “needed” therapy, or only want medication



## Offering Options and Supporting Men to Make Choices

Treatment options: Individual vs. group

- May feel individual therapy is safe – or that it will just “make him dependent” and “prove he’s weak”
- Group therapy may feel validating – or overwhelming



## Offering Options and Supporting Men to Make Choices

### Treatment Options to Investigate

- Off-base treatment, especially when sexual orientation an issue
- Therapists who can creatively leverage masculine and military conditioning and values
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
  - If not complex trauma, can rapidly reduce reexperiencing symptoms, transform memories and meanings
  - May benefit greatly without talking about “shameful” assault experience, feelings, or meanings



## Selected Resources

- Men’s experiences of sexual abuse and assault
  - Lisak, D. (1994). The psychological impact of sexual abuse: Content analysis of interviews with male survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 7, 525-548. [www.jimhopper.com/pdfs/Lisak1994.pdf](http://www.jimhopper.com/pdfs/Lisak1994.pdf)
- Motivational Interviewing: Great approach to dealing with victims’ ambivalence, and helping them to make wise choices about responding to the assault and its effects
  - [www.motivationalinterview.org/clinical/](http://www.motivationalinterview.org/clinical/)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR): Effective therapy for transforming assault memories, emotions and meanings, often quickly and without having to talk about them
  - Rogers, S. & Silver, SM (2002). Is EMDR an exposure therapy? A review of trauma. protocols. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58, 43-59. [www.jimhopper.com/pdfs/RogersSilver2002.pdf](http://www.jimhopper.com/pdfs/RogersSilver2002.pdf)
  - [www.emdr.com](http://www.emdr.com) - incl. “Find a Clinician” ([www.emdr.com/clinic.htm](http://www.emdr.com/clinic.htm))