

Project “Increasing the awareness of child-centered fathering in order to reduce the risk of harm to children and their mothers caused by domestic violence” 2018-1-EE01-KA204-047115

How to get men involved and to participate? How to talk to men about their problems?

Officials and professionals have a great responsibility to protect the relatives of the perpetrator, especially children. It is often difficult to identify violence. It's hard to talk to a man and a father about it. Officials and professionals have a great responsibility to protect the relatives of the perpetrator, especially children. It is often difficult to identify violence. It's hard to talk to a man and a father about it. Especially when the father does not admit his actions or does not understand what he did wrong.

This text has three parts that answer three questions:

- 1) Why don't men get involved?
- 2) How to get the men involved?
- 3) How to motivate men to take responsibility and change their behavior?

The first part describes the problems in getting men into services. This part is included as a background for the later parts and as a checklist for improving the services that want to reach men as a target group. The second part describes how

Why don't men get involved?

There are many reasons why men don't get involved as help-seekers, experts, volunteers or just participants in discussions about services and help the society should provide. In this part the two main problems could be outlined as being in the men themselves and on the other hand in the services that are provided. These conclusions come from

Stigma of weakness, stigma of failure, stigma of violence

Men are afraid to seek help. Although this takes different forms, the problem is recognizable throughout the world. Seeking help is seen as risk, as something that can endanger the future of the man. Help-seeking can be seen by a man as a sign of weakness, admittance of failure and incompetence.

These attitudes are shared by both some of the men and by some of the professionals helping men. Even more common than this is the fear by the men that these attitudes are alive and well and that they would be in trouble because they sought out help.

These stigmas are especially well presented when men have problems with violence or mental health issues. Both victims and perpetrators of violence are ashamed of the violence. Men experiencing mental health issues are ashamed of what they fear will be seen as their signs of weakness and non-normality. At the same time all are afraid what will happen to their careers, friendships and parenthood if their weakness, need for help, possible transgressions and admission of non-normality becomes public.

These thoughts can be countered by creating service that normalize having problems and praise help-seekers. Problems should not be downplayed and everyone should be welcome to the services. And as a warning: this positive attitude and taking help-seekers seriously is something that must be kept on at all times. In Finland one phone call to common emergency telephone number pushed the reliability of the service back for years when the emergency worker ridiculed the man for getting beaten up by a woman. This happened in 2010 and the help services have been seen as less reliable for men ever since.

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Men lack knowledge of services

The first hurdle in getting men into services is that men don't know about the services. Without this knowledge there can be no participation or helping others to find the services.

When men are polled about the services – even those targeting men – they as a group don't recognize the services by name and don't have as much knowledge about services for different kind of situations as a whole as women do. When asked why they have so little information, the men say they are disinterested. If they or their nearest and dearest don't need the services, they have no interest in them and they will not come up to them. They don't discuss services in general with their friends, they don't read as much about services in general as women do and because of this their social media doesn't have discussions about help seeking.

When men coming into services are asked how they have found the services, the three ways that come up most frequently for Miessakit are friends, professionals and web searches. If a new service is unknown to professionals and lack a robust web presence, it can almost be guaranteed that the men will not find this service.

There are no suitable services for men available

If there are no suitable services for men, the men will not get help. This can mean either that services are out of men's reach or that services are targeting someone else.

The services that are only available in largest cities are of course only available for those living near these areas. The services can and should also be available through phone and internet services, which will provide the access to the services to larger portion of the population. Not everyone will have the access in the ways they would prefer, but at least an effort has been made to give them some kind of access to services.

Even more serious a problem is that all the services may be for women. There are problems that have been seen as more woman-centric so the services have been formed around the idea that they are only needed for women. For example in Finland the work with victims of domestic violence, sexual violence and help for people with eating disorders has mostly been formed the idea that these are problems that women face. Statistically most of the people seeking help on these problems have been women, but the formation of the services has left the men facing these problems outside services.

The basic solution to these problems is to make sure there are at least part of these services are universal and able to provide services for men. This at least guarantees that men are not outright left outside services because of their gender. If the needs of the men are distinct enough, the next step should be that if there are enough men seeking help or the problem is recognized in scientific literature to be common enough there should be services just for men.

Services don't target men

Most of the services provided by a welfare state are universal services. They don't target any specific audience, they're available for all. This is a good basic principle, but can leave vulnerable groups feeling that the services are not targeted to men.

This vulnerability has been noticed in many instances. There usually are services for children, victims of sexual violence and other vulnerable groups. Men are usually one of the last target audiences to be

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regarded as vulnerable or needing specific types of approaches – by both men and the professionals planning the services alike.

Because the men are not the target audience for men, the services don't have specific tools for meeting the men in their hour of need. Some of the men are not accustomed to seeking the services and showing vulnerability. The universal services may not be accustomed to the ways men seek help and discuss their problems. Men's problems may go unnoticed because of this and there may be a need for services for just men.

Men don't feel accepted in services

Some men may think that universal services are in fact services for women, or that their problems are seen as less worthy of attention. They may have had bad experiences in services or they may have heard stories that make them think that men's problems are not taken seriously in the services. The bad experiences may get retold as a warning, which is usual for customer experiences.

The men may be prejudiced against the services in general. This may be because they are hesitant to admit their problems or to discuss them with professionals. This creates an obstacle for help-seeking that can only be overcome with long-lasting and thorough public relations work that targets men and other groups that are under-presented in the services.

Lack of anonymity

Anonymity can take several forms. The ones that usually present when help-seeking is concerned are being able to contact and take part in the services without these things getting into public knowledge and being able to stay completely anonymous or using aliases. The first one is more a question of confidentiality and should be a given in services as long as no one is in danger. The second one is a bit more problematic as men who should be getting noticed by authorities will stay hidden from them.

To men, being able to get help anonymously is important and this applies to both forms of anonymity. Some of this is because the men are in general not too hasty to admit their shortcomings and problems. They may fear the repercussions of seeking help for themselves and their loved ones. Because of this men are hesitant to approach services where they will can't stay anonymous.

These problems are especially evident when the men with problems are fathers. The men want to protect their children from child protection services and keep in contact with their children. They may feel – with or without reason – that by seeking help they will jeopardize their fatherhood and lose contact with their children.

To reach the men, they may need anonymous services where they can get help in assessing their situation so they can verbalize their problems, fears and needs. Most of the time it is enough to have confidentiality with an agreement that laws about needing to provide information to authorities will of course be regarded as part of the process.

The anonymity with no clear identity for the attending men can be in place in some services. For example chat services may be used in such ways that the service provider will have no way of knowing who they are talking with. This can be beneficial, if it brings men in that would otherwise stay outside all services and help. Many of them can assess their situation in these services and after that seek other help that is more in line with their need.

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The problems will begin if the services will begin to be filled with either attendees who are committing crimes or either trolling or threats in such a magnitude that it hinders the work that is being done. In these cases the tools in use should be re-evaluated and discussions should be had with local authorities. The service provider should not keep on doing services that are either not keeping crime in bay or that are proving to be useless.

Minorities seek help even less than others

Minorities are almost always under-presented in services. Men as a whole are usually under-presented, but the problem is even more evident when talking about men who are also part of some minorities.

The minorities can take several form: they can be for example about disabilities, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, language, being handicapped or mental health. Whatever the form, the men of minority are even more averse to help-seeking than men in general. This problem is ever more present if they are part of several minorities at once. In general a queer man is more likely to seek help and get it than a queer man who is disabled and speaks minority languages.

The main problem the minorities face is that the services are not tailored to them. Their problems may have elements that help providers don't have enough knowledge. They may have problems communicating with the help providers because of this.

Some members of the minorities may also feel that the authorities don't trust them and because of this they won't trust the help-providers as much. Even if they do contact service providers, this may make them tell only parts of their situation to the help providers, change crucial details or withhold information from them.

One reason for not seeking help or not giving enough information is sometimes to protect the minority group from blemish. The men may have a problem, but they don't want to make their problem known because they fear that it would in some way be thought to be a problem that all members of their minority share.

This fear of blemish can be battled by talking about all men of all walks life when doing publicity for the service. When men of minorities are told that the problems they are facing are just problems that people from all walks of life in this society can face, they will begin to think that they can begin to care about getting help for their problem more than they care about causing trouble to other members of their minority.

The access to the services is not easy enough

If there are obstacles or treshold in entering the services, the men are too often inclined to give up. These obstacles can for example be bureacratic, monetary, geographic or about condition the participant should be in.

This problem is both a problem in men that seek help and in the services themselves. The services can have too long a time from initial contact to getting into the programs and the men themselves can give up too easily. The services can't change the men and the men need the help, so the access to the services should be made as easy as possible. This can be a burden and it takes work to have an easy enough access to the services, but in the long run this can bring in more – or even some – of the men who would give up on services.

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In Finland the general experience with men seeking help has been, that they are usually in crisis or their mind is made up just in that moment when they seek help. If this is not followed up on, they will give up within a few weeks or even days as their mood stabilizes. This is especially true in services concerning domestic violence or substance abuse. When the men are feeling guilty and can't unsee their problems, they contact the services. After this their guilt and panic begins to diminish. If services want to reel them in, this should be done as soon as possible, preferably within the next work day from contact.

If the service is overloaded and can't take more customers because of that, this should be told upfront to the men. The worst kind of service is the one where fast contact is promised, but this promise can't be fulfilled. Even in these situations it's better to contact the men as soon as possible, but made the first meeting postponed. This will give them a way in, even though the waiting for the first meeting will make many of them rationalize their way out of help-seeking and into giving up.

Some men have a preference on the gender of the professionals helping them

Some men want to meet professionals who are women. Some men want to meet professionals who are men. Most don't have a clear preference. The reasons for this can be a multitude and men themselves won't have a solid answer when asked why they feel this way about the gender of the professionals.

Whatever the reasons are, these preferences can be a problem if there are no representatives of the preferred gender available. The men may feel uncomfortable, unable to communicate or suspicious of the role the professional will take in their discussions. Because of this the gender of the professionals can be a burden or a shortcut.

Easiest way to address this problem is to have both men and women among the professionals working with the men. If the men will be able to choose the gender of the professionals they want to discuss their problems with, both reaching the men and communicating with them will be easier in an instant.

There are no men working as professionals or volunteers

If the services have no men who work in them either as professionals or volunteers, the men may think that the men are just problems or objects in this work. This can make them question of the value of the program and their value if they attend the program. Because of this, there should be men represented in the workforce and amongst the volunteers, if possible.

There are too few volunteer programs for men

When men encourage other men in seeking help and getting better, they take the message in much more easily. Because of this it is beneficial to have a volunteer programs for the men who have attended the programs or who just want to help other men.

The volunteers in these programs can give a human face to help-seeking, praise the program or just meet other men and talk about their own progress. This will give the attendants hope that they themselves will be successful in overcoming their problems one day. These volunteers will also be something that media will like to mention in their coverage, which is important in normalizing help-seeking and help-seekers.

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How to get the men involved?

This part of the text gives a guideline of how services for men can be built. The guideline is grounded on the experiences of Miessakit NGO and other Finnish organizations that have built successful services for men. The examples of solutions and problems on this part of the text are from Miessakit.

Examples used in the text are from services that involve violence in men’s lives, but also from MASI work that has been done with father’s who experience depression in their families when their children are very young. The latter examples are used to show that the following guideline can – at least in Finnish context – be universally used when working with men, not just in crisis work involving domestic violence in men’s lives.

Build services slowly

You can’t get all the services up in an instant. All services need time to build cooperative networks, get services up and running, build customer base and create both general reputation and good word of mouth amongst the target audience. As services for men not usually regarded as top priority or needed and men themselves are prone to dismiss their need for services as a gender, all these steps take more thought, time and work than usual. Have clear goals and don’t expect overnight success.

Create stories and successess

The work with men need stories and successess. What this means is that when the work starts, one of the goals should be to have one round of the whole help process succeed. This process should have distinct indicators for the effectiveness of the program. The participants should be interviewed and stories about the impact of the program in their lives gathered. The data from indicators and the stories are the building blocks for the future work.

Use both the data and the stories

The data and the stories can be used to build the reputation and customer base for the services. They are the first proof that services are both needed and effective. When reporting about the service, both numeric indicators of success and quotations from the participants can make the work and it’s value understandable.

When beginning the work with fathers with infants who have depression in their families the first stepping stone towards success was getting the fathers to tell about their lives and the impact the program had on it. The program had measurable impact as a short-term intervention program, but this was not enough to make it widely appreciated. Getting the stories from the fathers and their families out was what really turned the tide for the program. Both officials and the press loved the stories and began to support it whole-heartedly. Measuring was not enough to sway the feelings, people need emotional tales too.

Create connections and build respectability

Contacting all the service providers, officials and NGOs working in the field makes the service known. Through these contacts the service can show cooperation, ability to help it’s target audience and proof that

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the need for such services exists in the first place. After this trust is created, these networks can begin to bring in the men in need of the services that the program provides.

At the same time as the people working in the field are connected, the program should reach out to media, politicians and other interest groups. These groups may not bring in the men right away, but they can help the respectability of the program and how well it will be received in other instances.

In Miessakit, after creating our program for men who have experienced violence the program was taken in as part of the domestic violence detection and treatment system for the Helsinki area hospital system, which is largest in Finland. This took time to work in, but opened many doors in the long run.

Make the services inclusive and include that in your marketing

You can't know for sure who needs your services most and who doesn't. Because of this it's easiest create advertising and social media presence that includes diverse men but keeps the message abstract or even a bit vague, in both words and pictures. This leaves the program open for imagination and all men can find it approachable.

Targeted advertisement

When creating a program that has distinct target audience, the advertisement should be targeted. At first it may be beneficial to find the medias that target audience uses and use those to the fullest. This may mean that resources are targeted – both time and money – but advertisement seems like it is not.

Word of mouth

The best kind of advertisement for men's services is men recommending the services for other men. The men appreciate this and will seek those other services out more likely. They also are more likely to go through the whole program if other men have told them that the program was beneficial to them.

The most organic way to get good word of mouth is to create good services with clear benefits for men and keep them going long enough. This will take years of work but pay off in a big way. When the men who have been helped men see other men in similar situations, they will recommend the services to them. This is also the kind of recommendation that the men are least cynical and wary of.

The less organic and less effective but faster way to use word of mouth is to create systems for collecting men's experiences. How many percentages of the men would have benefited from the program? Would they recommend the program for other men in similar situations? What would they say were the main changes in their lives? Were the problems that were avoided by attending the program? If there are quotes or videoclips of men saying these things, the program is more likely to be taken seriously by its target audience.

Create volunteer networks

After they have gone through a good program that has helped them, the men are in such a mood that many of them would want to help men in similar situations. The easiest way to harness this good will of men and create a way to get the organic word of mouth going is to create volunteer networks.

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Many programs have a distinct place for volunteers in their programs. There may for example be places for them in meeting for men beginning the program, in mentoring the men during the program or in after-program work with men. This work makes the men attending the program more attached to it and more likely to go through the whole program. On top of this volunteer work is very motivational for the volunteers and makes them more likely to stick with the changes they have been able to make in their lives.

If there is no place for volunteer men within the program, they can still be used around it as volunteers. The men can volunteer for instances where the program is presenting itself. Fairs, and shows can always use extra hands and contact persons. Media is always eager to have volunteers come in and talk about their experiences. This should be used, as long as the volunteers are not harming themselves or someone else by attending.

One way that Miessakit has used volunteers is by creating after-program volunteer opportunities. These have been peer groups with various interestest, for example book clubs, yoga, discussion groups, brewing, nature hiking, sauna hobby groups, floorball and groups for men who are caregivers to their relatives. When they have come to work in Miessakit, their main focus may have been their own divorce, violence in their lives, depression, fatherhood or something else, but the after-program peer groups give them opportunity to support other men. The groups are shown to lessen the men’s lonely, keep them more active and support them in their work and family life.

The volunteer work is not without it’s problems. If unsupervised, the basic principles of the work can be forgotten and the work may be unsuccessful. Volunteers must be supported and given training regularly. Even though the men may be motivated, some of the men will always drop out from the volunteer work after some time. Because of this new volunteers must be recruited regularly. Volunteer networks on the whole take money and time to keep going. The benefits outweigh the cost in many cases, but as this is not always the case, these calculations must be done on a case-by-case basis.

How to motivate men to take responsibility and change their behavior?

The men want to take responsibility and avoid it if they feel threatened. The change they themselves want to bring into their lives is likely to happen. The change thrust upon them by others is not likely to happen.

Motivating men to take responsibility for their actions is a balancing act. The program wants to instill certain ways of thinking and acting into the men attending the program. The professionals in the program have probably seen the actions the men take numerous times and know quite well how the man is most likely to succeed in changing their lives. If these ideas are pushed, then man will pull back and begin to defend himself, not making the changes. Because of this the changes need to be brought in slowly, so that the man verbalizes the changes himself and then begins to find the solution himself, with just a bit of help from the professionals. When the men have these heureka-moments themselves, they will be motivated and change their behavior as it’s their own change they are working towards.

During the the parts of this article, certain common ways of working towards this self-realization and self-motivation are discussed. These can be used as guidelines with most programs as the situations are universal. In some instances these guidelines may have to be thwarted because of the local ethic guidelines or laws because of the problems being worked on. This will hinder the program, but that is no excuse for non-compliance with laws or ethics.

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Bring the men in voluntarily

First principle in motivating men is that they should come into the program voluntarily. Voluntary change happens, mandatory change is something that more often than no seems to happen but stays superficial. Even having official benefits that the men get from attending the program makes the program a tool for working on their situation, not a tool for internal change.

If men are brought into the services that is mandatory for them or that has benefits available for attending the program, the program will have less of an impact on attendees. This can be bypassed somewhat by making the men choose things when inside the program. The man can set some of the main goals for himself. He can choose what kind of extra work he can do to reach these goals. He can set milestones that he should reach on the way to where he'll want to be during different parts of his journey.

The personal goals bring in a feeling of control and make the change seem more personal. These feelings make the change more likely to happen.

Judgement of behavior, not people

When describing the process, it's important not to judge the participants. If they feel judged and unworthy, they will not participate. Because of this it's useful to show to them that their actions are not the whole of them, just one part of their lives and actions. This leaves them room to have self-worth and resources which to rely on while still working towards changing their behavior and leaving the unwanted modes of actions behind.

This judgement of actions, not participants is something that should be included in all parts of the program. When creating social media presence, giving lectures, publishing ads, talking to men themselves or educating people in the field, the same attitude should be present. When men know they will not be judged but worked with, they will come into programs and they are more likely to complete the programs.

Use of feelings and fatherhood as tools

Feelings are important to people and because of this they are something that can be used as tools when helping men. Easiest way of using the feelings is to have the men think about what is important to them, discuss those things and build the change upon the things the men feel strongly about and what they want to strive for in the long term.

If the feelings of the man are known, the professionals can work with them, assisting them on reaching the goals they themselves feel strongly about and reminding the men about what they themselves talked about in the previous discussions. This makes the men feel that the work that is being done is something that's important for them and that they are the driving force in the process.

One of the most useful feelings when working with the men is their love for their children. Men want to be better fathers, better men, reliable and trustworthy. Because of this the work that make it clear that the work will help the men in reaching these goals is work that the men take much more seriously. This can bring men into the work and makes them work harder when in the program.

In Finnish NGO work using the promise of better fatherhood has been shown to work in diverse fields, including violence work, work with depression, substance abuse, young fathers with problems and divorce counseling. In all these fields men have been reluctant to admit they have problems, but when their children are at stake, they will admit problems and seek help. Because of this advertising usually includes

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portions where better fatherhood and parenting skills are promised. In many cases better relationships with their partners and being better equipped to handle work-life balance are also promised in the advertisements and the men seem to latch onto these promises too.

Let the man talk

When polled about their experiences when seeking help, the men often feel that they are outsiders, objects for the help whose own subjective experiences and need are not addressed. If the help-provider creates such an atmosphere, they are hindering their own work and losing many of the tools they would otherwise have when trying to help the men.

In many instances when the men come into services, they have an urgent need to speak. They may be worried, they may have had the problem for years without talking about it to anyone or they may just want to vent their feelings. This rawness and urgency should be seen as a fruitful situation that can be used to get information about what has occurred and what is important to the man. In these initial discussions the men may be the most open about their situation they have ever dared to be, letting out things they would not have said before and would never say if they had more time to think about how they want to represent themselves. Letting the man talk everything out can be both beginning of the healing process for the man and give the professional essential toolkit for the future.

Later in the process some of the wisest professionals let the man talk themselves into the same conclusions the professional would recommend for them. This makes everything afterwards easier, as the dreams, changes and goals come from the men themselves.

In the end of the process it is essential to have the men talk about how the changes during the process have affected their lives and what they want from their own future. When the men talk about their own futures, the likelihood of those dreams becoming the truth are greater than if they were someone else's dreams.

Help the men themselves verbalize and acknowledge the problems

One of the problems when working with men is that they may not even have words for the problems they are facing. In some cases they don't even have words for the feelings they are feeling. Because of this one part of the process in naming, verbalizing and acknowledging the problems the men are facing.

Men may not know what they are feeling. In Finnish work with men and boys, they can regularly say that their only feeling is „Vituttaa“. This means that they are feeling fucked up, irritated, bothered in general. This is seen as a good general diagnosis, which can be worked upon. The men are talked into having more words for different forms of „vitutus“ and they are talked into describing different situations where they are having it.

When men begin to have words for feelings and begin to tell where they have problems, they can begin to acknowledge their problems and see the harm those problems cause in their lives. Many men have problems in seeing these problems and many of them have built defences so that they would not have to see the harm. One of the goals of every program should be to open the men's eyes so they can see the problems and have to react to them.

Notice problematic situations and triggers for problems

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When the men have begun to have words for their problems and they have acknowledged these problems, they can begin to notice in which situations these problems arise and if there are some triggers that make the situations worse.

Noticing the different situational problems is something that takes different forms with different kinds of problems. Same goes with the solutions the men are able to come up with and stick to.

A classic example from violence work could be a man who gets into the fights and sometimes attacks people he deems hostile in public. In discussion the man does not seem to know what makes these attacks happen and seems very ashamed of his actions. When the violent encounters are deconstructed, they all happened when he is drunk and in public with a certain group of friends. After this it's easy to show that not being drunk, in public or with this group of friends could prevent the violent impulses.

Professionals can urge the man to change their behavior, use the information they have gathered, remind the man of their deepest feelings and the larger goals they have. But that all they can do. In the end it's up to the man to make the changes he is able and willing to make.

It is also important to note that just getting rid of the problematic situations and triggers may not be enough to create lasting change in the men's lives. If for example the man is in an abusive relationship, getting out of the relationship will most likely stop the abuse. Unfortunately this is not enough, if the man doesn't change their own behavior. In this example the man may get into very similar relationship, choosing their partners in a similar way and acting the same way as before. The chain of abuse will continue, if the man avoids his current problems, but doesn't change his own behavior patterns in the long run.

Change the behavior patterns

The long-term goal is change in men's behavior patterns, if they themselves are the cause of their problems. This is possible after the men have verbalized both their feelings and problems, noticed how and when the problems are triggered and are motivated to change their behavior patterns for good.

The change in behavior can take many forms, but without introspection and seeing both their own part in problems and what the effect others have on their lives this change can be superficial or built on wrong premises.

The specific changes are connected to the specific problems and the way men react to their surroundings. Most of these changes take a lot of work and professional support to implement into daily behavior during the participation in the program. After the program there may be need for support, check-ups and ways to implement the new ways of acting into changing life situations.

Change of thinking or manhood can't be forced, but it can be a planned byproduct

As a final note, it can be noted, that change of thinking and change in how men perceive themselves and their manhood can be a byproduct from the programs. These can be secondary goals for the programs, but they should be kept out from the forefront and rarely mentioned, especially when advertising for men themselves. The reasons for keeping changes in manhood secondary are strictly utilitarian ones.

The main reason for this is that the men don't want to change. They want help.

In many cases getting the help they want may only be possible if they change. But this change can be too overwhelming for them to face. If they feel their identity, manhood or fatherhood is threatened or

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unworthy, they will cease to seek help. This will prevent the positive changes that the men could be able to create, if they were approached in a different way.

Because of this the programs should have clear, concrete goals and promises. If the man comes into the program, they should have clear small steps they can take that will make their situation better. They should be given a safe space where they can take these steps, own their process and begin to create their own change.

Keeping the changes in men as a byproduct will give the ownership of these changes to men themselves. A change like this is something the men themselves discover themselves or from their peers. And discovery like that – that’s something they can be proud of and something they will want to share with other men. The change by men is a change they will create in other men.