

Why Are So Many Christian Men on Emotional Lockdown?

Mental health experts say the COVID-19 pandemic has taken an enormous toll on people emotionally. A huge number of Americans struggle with depression, anxiety, sleeplessness and suicidal thoughts because of prolonged isolation.

Psychologists have known for a long time that women tend to suffer from depression more than men. Is that really true – or is it possible that men simply do better jobs of hiding their feelings? After all, while women admit they are depressed, more than 77% of suicides are committed by men, and more than 80% of violent crimes are committed by men.

It would seem that women are more in touch with their painful emotions, while men hold their feelings inside until they explode.

This is not just true out there in the world. Even in the church, men have mastered the art of masking their pain. They are less likely to engage in small groups, build meaningful friendships or seek help for their marriage problems. And the pandemic hasn't helped. I know of several men who have pulled away from church, using the virus as an excuse to retreat into perpetual isolation.

That means as we slowly return to “normal” after the pandemic is over, the church must do a better job of understanding men and how to minister to their emotional needs.

I've identified four main reasons men tend to hide:

1. We lack supportive relationships. When I was a boy, everyone was familiar with the Marlboro Man, one of the most recognized icons in American advertising. This rugged cowboy was always with his horse in a Western setting, and he was

always smoking a cigarette. His tough-guy image carried a powerful, subliminal message: Real men are always alone.

Those cigarette ads are no longer permitted in magazines today, but the idea that men should be isolated is still a common belief. In fact, young American guys in 2021 are even more isolated than men were 50 years ago because of divorce, lower marriage rates, technology, pornography and video games. We are witnessing an epidemic of loneliness in today's culture, and it's evident in churches too.

David Smith, author of the book *The Friendless American Male*, says of Christian men today: "The fragmentation of community life; corporate pressures; the breakdown of the extended and nuclear family; the drive for success and the rate of mobility have all taken a tremendous toll on the numbers of intimate friendships we acquire and sustain."

2. We have deep father wounds. The very word "father" hits a raw nerve for a lot of guys. Many men suffer from what we could call a "father ache." A lot of guys have a deep void in their hearts because their dads were either absent entirely when they were young, emotionally distant, abusive or addicted. That's a big reason they struggle to understand the unconditional love of the heavenly Father.

The best way to overcome this is for strong, healthy father figures to step in and provide mentoring. But where are these mentors in the church today?

3. We struggle with our identities as men. Many men today have something to prove. They are frustrated and insecure because they didn't get the affirmation they needed from parents, especially fathers. So they are driven and performance-oriented. Christian men who are bent in this direction base their identities on what they do, not who they are.

Performance orientation leads to all kinds of dysfunction. It drives some men to keep insane work schedules. It fuels a

competitive atmosphere in the workplace. It pushes men to climb the ladder of success so they can buy the latest toys. It also instills in some men a deep sense of failure or inadequacy.

The only way men can overcome these struggles is to talk openly about them. So the church has to become a safe place where men can be open and vulnerable about their pain.

4. We prefer to medicate our emotional pain. God created us with the capacity for emotional release. He gave us mouths so we can talk about our struggles. He gave us tear ducts so we could cry when necessary. He gave us ears so we can listen to others when they are hurting. And He gave us arms and hands to be able to embrace each other when we are dealing with grief or tragedy.

Pain must be processed; it cannot be stuffed away. But what happens when we don't use those God-given outlets? When a man buries his problems, he will almost always find a way to medicate. This is why so many men, including Christian guys, become addicted to alcohol, nicotine, porn, illegal drugs or prescription medicines.

Are the men in your church struggling? Are they paralyzed by shame, loneliness, secret addictions and a lack of spiritual passion? We can't build healthy churches if we don't have healthy men. But churches today are ill-equipped to meet the needs outlined here.

As this pandemic slowly fades, let's look for new strategies to connect men and provide the healing they need. If we make this a priority, God will change emotionally crippled men into healers.{eo}

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