

Letter to the Editor—American Journal of Men’s Health: Not Just the Experience of Men Aged Over 80 Years

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In the September–October 2020 publication of this journal, research by King and colleagues investigated the role of masculinity in the way men aged over 80 contextualize living, dying, and suicide (King et al., 2020). One theme within their analysis was men “finding out we’re not invincible” and discussion suggests that older men experience ageing related threats and injuries, where the expected rewards of masculinity such as invincibility are denied. This may be seen as a contributing factor on a trajectory toward a lack of masculine activity, feelings of hopelessness, and possible suicide. Our research of men aged between 25 and 60 years who died by suicide revealed similar themes; however we write to offer an alternative viewpoint. From interviews with family members of the deceased, we heard that these men questioned their path in life and suffered crises about their existence and loss of identity as a result of perceived failures, especially when not achieving stereotypical middle-age goals. Half of these men were reported to struggle with, or perceived they failed at performing hegemonic masculinity—the “most honoured way of being a man” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Other research highlights this perceived failure in suicidal young men and their struggle between actual standards compared to ideal standards of masculinity; and suggests that suicidal young men may reach adulthood without consolidating their identities (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Others suggest that the expectation and stereotype for young men to be autonomous and socially independent comes at the cost of suppressing their need for connection in relationships, and that this interferes with healthy development of an autonomous identity (Meissner & Bantjes, 2017). The problem here is the likelihood for well-accepted suicide risk factors such as experiencing difficulties within interpersonal relationships and having fewer social connections (Meissner & Bantjes, 2017) to become entrenched masculinity norms for young men and then continue throughout their lifespan. We offer the viewpoint that younger men’s perceived failure at performing masculinity aligns with King and colleagues’ finding that the expected rewards of masculinity for older men are denied, but that threats

to “masculine” invincibility may occur earlier in life as well as in older age. Suicide prevention efforts for older men will no doubt benefit from the findings of King and colleagues, but we must also consider how they can be applied to the experiences of younger men.

Authors’ Note

The original research to which this letter refers received ethics approval (La Trobe University, Human Ethics Committee #HEC18271) and informed consent for participation was obtained. Data may be made available upon request from the first author.

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