

'Toxic masculinity' is toxic terminology

[Commentary](#) / [Biases](#) / [Masculinity](#)

Written By [John Barry](#)



Imagine being [a boy today](#). The average boy is behind girls at every level of education. Boys are more likely to have their schoolwork impacted by ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorders. They are 16 times more likely than girls to find school difficult due to being colour blind. Boys are more likely to be excluded from school. From the age 16-24 they are less likely to be in education, employment or training. As adults, they are twice as likely to suffer from substance abuse, 83% of rough sleepers are male, 96% of the prison population are male, and 75% of suicides are male.

On top of that, imagine being a boy at school and hearing about [toxic masculinity](#) in your Relationship, Health and Sex Education (RHSE) classes. Then imagine going online and being bombarded with even more [negativity about men](#) while [being blamed](#) for the negativity that girls experience online. What must this do to the mental health of boys? No wonder so many of them tune out of the mainstream, and are then vulnerable to exploitation by other nefarious influences online that they unwarily wander into.

“...around 85% of respondents thought the term ‘toxic masculinity’ is insulting, and probably harmful to boys.”

As a psychologist, I’m concerned about mental health, especially the mental health of men and boys because it’s been overlooked for so long. Because there was so little interest in how much the negative discourse around masculinity impacts boys, my colleagues and I ran [a survey](#). We found that around 85% of respondents thought the term ‘toxic masculinity’ is insulting, and probably harmful to boys.

My latest research has just [been published](#). It assessed the views of over 4000 men in the UK and Germany, and found that thinking masculinity is bad for your behaviour is linked to having worse mental wellbeing. Although the direction of causation isn’t definite in this type of study (we don’t know whether negative views about masculinity damage mental wellbeing, or whether low mental wellbeing causes men to view masculinity negatively) it is clear that negative views of masculinity are linked to wellbeing to a significant degree.

“My latest research has just been published. It assessed the views of over 4000 men in the UK and found that thinking masculinity is bad for your behaviour is linked to having worse mental wellbeing.”

But some good news from my study is that positive views of masculinity are linked to better mental wellbeing. This fits with other evidence – typically overlooked in the media and elsewhere – that masculinity can be beneficial to mental health. Indeed this news is no surprise to the average person in the street, many of whom recognise [the value of masculinity](#) much more than people in academia, the media and government.

There are [rare exceptions](#), but the majority of information about masculinity we are exposed to is unreasonably negative, so you can be [forgiven for thinking](#) that

men are the oppressors of women rather than the protectors of women. Interestingly, my study found that better mental wellbeing was associated with believing masculinity makes men protective of women, and worse mental wellbeing was associated with believing masculinity makes men feel violent towards women.

One of the implications of my study was that “if we want men to have good mental health, a useful strategy might be to help them to appreciate the ways in which their masculinity can have a positive impact on their behavior and the people around them”. So my message to schools, the media, governments and NGOs is: there is more to be gained by being positive, so it’s time to stop being so negative about men and masculinity.

The full text of the paper this article is based on can be [downloaded for free here](#)
Some of the material above is referenced in this paper.

Reference this article as: JA Barry (2023). “*Toxic masculinity’ is toxic terminology*”. *Male Psychology*, 3 (4), 19-22. Available online at <https://www.centreformalepsychology.com/male-psychology-magazine-listings/toxic-masculinity-is-toxic-terminology>



Dr John Barry is a Psychologist, researcher, clinical hypnotherapist and co-founder of the Male Psychology Network, **BPS Male Psychology Section**, and **The Centre for Male Psychology**. Also co-editor of the **Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology & Mental Health**, co-author of the **textbook Perspectives in Male Psychology: An Introduction (Wiley)** and co-author of the online course **Introduction to Male Psychology and Mental Health** (approved by the BPS for the purposes of continuing professional development).