

What is 'positive masculinity'?

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'Positive masculinity' is showing signs of becoming a buzzword in the media. This sounds like a positive turn of events, but will the term 'positive masculinity' end up meaning 'less masculinity', perpetuating a more subtle version of the tired old 'toxic masculinity' narrative?

I was asked some questions on the topic of positive masculinity for a [Newsweek article](#). Only a few lines of my answers were used, but you can read below my answers in full, with the questions edited for clarity. I welcome any comments you have in the section below the article.

What is positive masculinity? The term positive masculinity comes from the school of 'positive psychology', which focuses on improving people by utilising their strengths. Positive masculinity then is about recognising the

strengths of masculinity, such as how physical strength and risk-taking are crucial in many aspects of life, such as the emergency services where physical strength and courage are vital. Thus positive masculinity is good for men's wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around them. The meaning of the term is sometimes used to refer to examples of where men show more traditionally feminine traits, such as talking openly about their feelings. From a Jungian perspective all people are a mix of masculine and feminine traits (with men being mostly masculine), but 'positive masculinity' shouldn't imply that it's a good idea to replace traditionally masculine traits with feminine traits, as this process is likely to cause a unhealthy [imbalance in men](#).

How does it compare to toxic masculinity? Toxic masculinity originally referred specifically to of immature males who had not yet learned – usually because they have not taken part in traditional masculine rites of passage – to connect with their deeper, mature masculinity, and thus failed to bond in a constructive way with their community. In recent years the term 'toxic masculinity' has been taken out of its original context and applied to a range of destructive behaviours by men, particularly violence or sex crimes. Lots of people now recognise this latter use as a problem, because it is too easily interpreted as 'masculinity is toxic', which is a potentially damaging message, especially for boys, who may react to this message in a number of unhealthy ways e.g. reduced mental wellbeing, reduced ability to regulate their emotions, and violence.

How do [Tim Walz](#) and [Travis Kelce](#) fit into the category of positive masculinity? Tim Walz is a football coach, military veteran and sharp-shooting hunter. These are all positive activities e.g. the military can be good for men's mental health as well as serving to protect civilians, and thus all examples of positive masculinity. Travis Kelce is a football player which is a traditionally masculine competitive activity, enjoyed by him and his many fans, and an example of positive masculinity. Taylor Swift fans like the way that his strong physical presence means he [almost replaces her](#)

[security personnel](#), and thus embodies the traditional male protector role. Travis Kelce has shown a softer side in his interactions with Taylor Swift, for example, he talks about how he made a [friendship bracelet](#) for her but was hurt that he couldn't give it to her in person. Nonetheless he has been accused of toxic masculinity after he screamed in the face of his coach. Tim Walz too has been criticised not only for being [too traditional in his masculinity](#), but for undermining traditional masculinity by campaigning for tampons in boys' bathrooms, and for ultimately failing to be traditionally masculine (the 'stolen valour' accusations about his military record). These various accusations and opinions show how difficult it is to sum up the value of a man based only in terms of his masculinity. People are complex and multifaceted, and inevitably fallible. It's easy for the media to magnify one part of a person and play down another part, but in reality we are all a mixture of various traits and temperaments and impossible to understand properly in terms of just our masculinity or femininity.

What other male figures represent positive masculinity? Lots of men do. In fact lots of everyday fathers do, by being a provider (earning a living), a protector (of loved ones from danger) and a loving and reliable father. But I think there is too much focus on masculinity in recent years. The narratives tend to be poorly informed (e.g. based on questionable definitions of masculinity), narrowly focused, and distract from traits that might be more important e.g. really we should be interested in how much Tim Walz can give the people of the US what they really need in their daily lives, rather than how much he can give them a warm glow about his perceived masculinity. We could instead focus on the core values that people embody. For example, successive surveys of thousands of different men in the US, UK and Germany between 2017 and [2022](#) have found that the two core values they consistently most aspire to are being honest and being reliable. These findings have been [reported](#) in the press and haven't really come as a surprise to many everyday people who recognise that their sons, husbands, work colleagues etc are just people who are trying

their best to get by in life, trying their best to be honest and reliable.

Are figures like Walz a welcome change to negative stereotypes of masculinity? It's good to see men feeling more free to express who they are, whether this fits into a traditionally masculine framework or not. In recent decades a very negative stereotype of masculinity has emerged, where the most violent or misogynistic behaviours of a very few men are presented as if they are representative of all men. My [research](#) suggests this negative stereotype very possibly has a negative impact on men's mental wellbeing, and [around 80%](#) of men and women express concern that the term 'toxic masculinity' may have a negative impact on boys and won't improve the behaviour of men. In fact this negative stereotype of men and masculinity does not identify the actual causes of the problem behaviour, and might make the problem behaviours worse.

Walz has publicly spoken about his stance on IVF and women's reproductive rights in the past. Does this add to his perceived aura of positive masculinity? His views on IVF and women's rights are in line with the Democrat party, and although will be seen as positive by Democrat voters, and seen as masculine because Walz is a man, really it's not clear how much these issues are aspects of his masculinity.

Will the aura of positive masculinity around Tim Walz be better received by male or female voters? It makes a lot of sense for Tim Walz to soften his masculinity to some degree because this will appeal to Democrat voters, who are less likely to be [male and heterosexual](#) than Republican voters. It is likely that some people – especially Republican men – will see his comments about IVF and women's rights as 'virtue signalling', and thus inauthentic and unappealing. Regarding Travis Kelse: if he wants to appeal to Taylor Swift fans, who are predominantly female, then softening his masculinity a little will help, though some of his traditional masculinity will appeal to them too. Softening his masculinity is likely to appeal less to his football fans.

Is positive masculinity accepted by certain generations more than others?

Some evidence suggests that younger males are sceptical of media presentations of both traditional masculinity and 'woke' variations of masculinity. Older men tend to be more supportive of traditional masculinity than younger men, and young men are more supportive of traditional masculinity than young women. Thus younger women are most likely to be impressed by the values expressed by Tim Walz and Travis Kelce.

Some final thoughts

In our chapter on Positive Masculinity in the *Handbook of Male Psychology*, consultant clinical psychologist Martin Seager and I suggest that being positive about traditional masculinity is a more effective way of getting the best out of men than focusing potential negatives of masculinity, such as criminal violence. If we want to reduce such behaviour, we need to look at the real causes of the problems, such as social deprivation. To put it another way, everybody is better off not blaming masculinity for bad behaviour by men.

Selected references / recommended reading

- Seager, M., Barry, J.A. (2019). [Positive Masculinity: Including Masculinity as a Valued Aspect of Humanity](#). In: Barry, J.A., Kingerlee, R., Seager, M., Sullivan, L. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04384-1_6
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- Liddon, L., & Barry, J. (2021). [Perspectives in male psychology: An introduction](#). John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 978-1-119-68535-7

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