
CHAPTER I

Research and Theory

This chapter provides an overview of the research that was used to guide and support the creation of the *Amazing Dads!* curriculum. Each of the building blocks of this program will be briefly discussed: the influence that male socialization has on boys and men, the fundamentals of trauma-informed care, the importance of father-responsive services, and the impact that various systems have on fathers. The authors of this program strongly encourage facilitators to continue expanding their knowledge in these areas as that will greatly serve them in further improving their skills when working with fathers. This chapter is not intended to be exhaustive in its description of these areas, but rather to offer a window into these topics while encouraging continued exploration on the part of those facilitating the program.

Male Socialization

The exploration of cultural and societal influences on how boys and men are socialized throughout the life span is the keystone concept for the *Amazing Dads!* program. Coupled with the importance of understanding trauma and the impact of trauma on men and boys, the ability to view fatherhood from the perspective of male socialization is critical to effectively facilitating the curriculum. The reason this is critical is that the path to creating a safe, trusting, and open environment for fathers

(or boys and men in general) requires an ability to address the concept of male socialization in a therapeutic, strengths-based, and solution-focused manner.

Perhaps the most important concepts to consider are those of gender and sex. *Sex* refers to whether one is considered biologically male, female, or intersex. *Gender* is a social construct in which specific messages are given to people regarding acceptable behaviors and characteristics. The role of gender varies from culture to culture and even within cultures and is impacted by many other factors: socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to name only a few.

Understanding that gender is a social construct, it is important to recognize that masculinity and femininity come with culturally informed “rules.” Dan Griffin’s work on “The Man Rules,” as well as recognition of “The Woman Rules,” is the lens through which this socialization is explored throughout the *Amazing Dads!* curriculum. What is important to stress in Griffin’s work is why they are called “rules.” There is little to no choice involved in the creation of these gender rules or in the pressure to adhere to them. The reward for following the rules is: acceptance and even safety which creates an incredible unconscious connection to the rules. Boys are not introduced to the rules and offered choices about which ones they want to adhere to. The younger they are when the Rules first get imposed upon them, the less autonomy they likely feel to push back on detrimental ones. The Man Rules simply become part of their experience of the world versus something they feel that they have agency over.

The idea of gender-based “rules” for men and women is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Not only do we observe various sets of “Man Rules” across the globe in different cultures (admittedly with nuances specific to each culture), but there are themes that are ubiquitous. Some of the more detrimental themes we can observe cross-culturally are related to masculine norms and trauma:

“From ancient allegories to current pop culture, one consistent theme in male heroism is that of sacrifice and resilience in the face of adversity. Across history, geographies, and cultures, pervasive narratives idealize men who experience traumatic events and can endure hardship, suffering, and physical and/or psychological violence. Historically, the male body and mind have often been considered expendable, and men have been expected to be strong, tough, and defenders of honor. As such, male violence and subsequent trauma have always been, and continue to be, woven into the fabric of masculinity and humanity.”

(Slegh et al. 2021)

Recognition of the connection between male socialization and trauma is hugely important and needs to be a significant driver of how services are developed, marketed, and implemented with male populations. It is this recognition that drove us to develop the *Amazing Dads!* program to address the often-overlooked needs of dads.

Values-Based Paradigm

There are different models for service delivery. The one that informs this curriculum is called Values-Based Services. There are six foundational components to this particular iteration of the model developed by Dan Griffin. See the following for a brief description of each:

1. ***Gender-responsive:*** Services and systems that are created to respond to an individual's unique needs and issues based on their gender conditioning, particularly, but not solely, within the binary of masculine and feminine. Creating a space for all gender expressions and identities is an essential part of gender-responsive services.
2. ***Trauma-informed:*** Understanding that the phenomenon and experience of trauma is a universal experience and must be taken into consideration at all levels of a program.
3. ***Culturally humble:*** While the terms cultural competence and cultural responsiveness are often used, when it comes to trauma-informed systems the preferred term is cultural humility. The main difference is the focus on becoming knowledgeable about another's culture and lived experience by listening to them, being a witness to their story, and helping to create a space for them to explore.
4. ***Recovery-oriented:*** It is so easy to focus on the problem when dealing with addiction and mental health needs, so recovery-oriented services mean that providers and the system focus on recovery from the very beginning and throughout the entire treatment process. This should be infused throughout the whole treatment process, from the language that is used in services ("substance use disorder" instead of "substance abuse" and "recovery maintenance" instead of "relapse prevention") to the focus on recovery and strengths in the discharge process.
5. ***Spiritually enriched:*** The focus is on connection and community. While it may include religious beliefs and practices it does not have to. The primary focus is that one is able to connect to a reality bigger than themselves and find practices and beliefs that support their living in community, however, that looks for them.
6. ***Family centric:*** No individual is raised in a vacuum and their caregivers and the environment(s) in which they live have profound impacts on their experiences, their identities, and their lives as a whole. This also recognizes that people exist in family systems throughout the life span, so family-centric services are part of a whole-person approach to treatment.

This paradigm takes a holistic approach to working with dads by recognizing the differences, uniqueness, and complexities that each individual participant possesses. Using the approach outlined earlier is designed to improve the engagement and outcomes for participants, no matter what they are entering services to achieve.

A Trauma-Informed Fatherhood Curriculum

Knowledge of the impact of trauma has grown exponentially in recent decades, expanding understanding of how pervasive it is while also being a very individualized experience. Along with this increase in knowledge and awareness has come the recognition that providers of all types (doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers, child welfare workers, teachers, principals, and probation/parole officers, among others) need to consider the work they do from a “trauma-informed” lens.

Trauma-informed care (TIC) refers to an approach in healthcare (and other arenas) that acknowledges the pervasiveness of trauma in the population, recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in all participants in the healthcare system (patients/clients, families, caregivers, staff/employees), uses knowledge of trauma and best practices to improve policies and organizational processes, and takes an active role in avoiding re-traumatization of those interacting within the system (Center for Healthcare Strategies, 2022). A TIC approach assumes that anyone within the care system may have experienced trauma, so everyone needs to be approached therapeutically and helped to feel safe in all interactions and environments. In addition, TIC does not apply only to interactions with healthcare consumers and employees but to the healthcare environments themselves: things like the layout of waiting rooms and patient rooms, literature and media visible in the environment, and training and support provided to non-clinical staff such as receptionists and security personnel.

The principles guiding *Amazing Dads!* are not just trauma-informed principles, they are the principles of *male* trauma-informed care, created by Griffin and Fallot and further expounded upon in the unpublished article by Fallot, Bebout, Griffin, and Dauer. While Fallot and Harris first identified five principles for TIC, and then SAMHSA identified six, the principles of *male* trauma-informed care developed by Fallot and Griffin highlighted a need for specific attention to be given to mutual responsibility and compassion as part of a TIC approach specifically working with male-identified individuals. Coming up, you will find a brief description of each principle along with examples, as well as descriptions of how the *Amazing Dads!* program incorporates each principle.

The following section explores SAMHSA's six principles while also incorporating the two additional principles from male trauma-informed care.

Components of TIC (Center for Healthcare Strategies, 2022; & SAMHSA, 2014):

1. **Safety:** Throughout the organization, patients and staff feel physically and psychologically safe.
 - a. Organize the environment to promote a sense of safety and calm, as best you can. From waiting areas, to security measures, to how people are greeted, the environment itself contributes to safety, either promoting it or detracting from it.
 - b. Develop consistency in your approach to dads you work with. Consistency can be making sure that you start and end each interaction in a similar way. Consistency gives them a sense of safety in knowing what to expect from their interactions with you.
 - c. Take opportunities to connect with the dad and build rapport and a relationship outside of being solely task oriented.
 - d. Teach practical skills to the dads in order to help them develop a repertoire of self-regulation skills such as grounding and relaxation.
 - e. **How Amazing Dads! addresses safety:** Safety is discussed right from the beginning in the first *Amazing Dads!* meeting and throughout the entire curriculum. Safety is framed as emotional and psychological safety in addition to physical safety, and we utilize the previous recommendations throughout. We developed a "safety check in" for every meeting as well when the men give a number from one to five indicating how safe they feel in the group.
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Decisions are made with transparency, and with the goal of building and maintaining trust.
 - a. As a professional, it is important to model trustworthiness to the dads. It is possible that the dads have not had trusting experiences with professionals, so being a model of trustworthiness, partly through your transparency, is a way to build that relationship.
 - b. Hold yourself to the same standards you hold the dads with whom you work.
 - c. Offer insight and explanations of the "why" of things whenever possible.
 - d. Clearly communicate any program expectations.
 - e. **How Amazing Dads! addresses trustworthiness and transparency:** Developing trust is a key emphasis of the *Amazing Dads!* program.

Transparency is evidenced by consistency in the meeting structure, obtaining verbal commitments from the fathers at key points, and clear communication of the goals of each meeting.

3. **Peer support:** Individuals with shared experiences are integrated into the organization and viewed as integral to service delivery.
 - a. Tap into resources you may already have – create an alumni group of dads who have completed your program.
 - b. Seek opportunities to have multiple dads meet, connect, and share experiences, especially in small groups. It can be incredibly powerful to help the dads recognize that others are going through similar circumstances.
 - c. Encourage dads to check in on one another between meetings. Help them develop an ethic of supporting one another.
 - d. **How Amazing Dads! addresses peer support:** *Amazing Dads!* facilitates a cohesive group environment where the participating dads can support one another through their lived experiences. There are many opportunities throughout the curriculum for the participants to provide feedback to one another, support one another through pain and in their growth, and create an environment where all participants know they are not alone in their journey to become the best fathers they can be. The curriculum also does something that many do not by using small groups where the men are able to have an even more intimate connection with one another, something challenging for so many men.
4. **Collaboration and mutuality:** Power differences – between staff and clients and among organizational staff – are leveled to support shared decision-making.
 - a. Avoid shaming or blaming the dads for mistakes and missteps.
 - b. Give the dads opportunities to collaborate with one another in smaller groups.
 - c. Whenever possible, avoid being directive or prescriptive. Give the dads freedom to choose what works best for them versus telling them what they need to do.
 - d. Utilize calculated and appropriate self-disclosure, taking into consideration the setting and working relationship you have with the dads.
 - e. **How Amazing Dads! addresses collaboration and mutuality:** *Amazing Dads!* participants are recognized as experts in their own lives. The fathers drive the decisions they make and how they choose to utilize the information, resources, and tools that are provided in the *Amazing Dads!* program. The program does not take a prescriptive approach, instead encouraging the fathers to determine how to be the best fathers – and men – they can be.

5. ***Empowerment, voice, and choice:*** Patient and staff strengths are recognized, built on, and validated – this includes a belief in resilience and the ability to heal from trauma.
 - a. Maintain a programmatic culture that highlights how the dads are experts in their own lives. In areas where you are the expert, take an approach of being a guide versus being a director of what the dads “should” do.
 - b. Work with the dads to identify their own goals for completion of your program, separate from any mandatory goals that may be imposed on them.
 - c. Give the dads the opportunity to drive processes. Ask questions such as “How would you like to proceed?” or “What would you like to start on?”
 - d. ***How Amazing Dads! addresses empowerment, voice, and choice:*** The *Amazing Dads!* program takes a strengths-based approach by encouraging the fathers to use internal and external resources already at their disposal (e.g., internal: desire for change and external: supports they may have from people in their lives). The approach in this program is that of a guide and of offering information and insight. It is non-directive and non-prescriptive. We recognize that lasting change comes from offering dads information that they can use and fit into their own personal circumstances.
6. ***Cultural, historical, and gender issues:*** Biases and stereotypes (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and geography) and historical trauma are recognized and addressed.
 - a. Practice cultural humility, seeking to empathize with the dads versus making assumptions about their experiences. Show curiosity and compassion toward the dads’ life experiences and perspectives.
 - b. Whenever possible, give the dads opportunities to consider perspectives different from their own.
 - c. ***How Amazing Dads! addresses cultural, historical, and gender issues:*** An entire meeting is devoted to discussion of the toxicity that comes with biases and stereotypes along with a discussion of historical and intergenerational trauma. Facilitators of this curriculum are strongly encouraged to develop awareness of their own biases and respond accordingly to avoid those biases creeping into their facilitation. There are many opportunities for the dads to hear experiences of others who are different from them.

7. **Mutual responsibility:** Each participant in the relationship is responsible to themselves and the other, in equal measure, and regardless of any structural power differences.
 - a. This goes beyond holding one party accountable and emphasizes that the dads AND facilitator(s) are responsible for their own roles and accountable to each other. This helps mitigate the inherent power imbalances.
 - b. Accountability is important and something to emphasize but place extra emphasis on how you plan to be accountable to the dads, not just how the dads are expected to be accountable as participants.
 - c. **How Amazing Dads! addresses mutual responsibility:** Facilitators are repeatedly encouraged to complete many of the activities that are part of the *Amazing Dads!* program to improve their ability to help the dads explore the content. At multiple points in the program, facilitators highlight how the dads are asked to be responsible to one another, to the facilitators, and to their children. Facilitators also repeatedly emphasize their own accountability to the dads.
8. **Compassion:** Exercise compassion toward the experiences of all dads who enter services. Recognize that each dad has strengths that can be drawn upon to make positive changes. Model compassion for them so they can begin to hold compassion for themselves.
 - a. Hold unconditional positive regard for the dads you interact with and emphatically accept them for who they are versus who you or others want them to be.
 - b. Emphasize that behaviors do not define the man while still clarifying that certain behaviors are not okay (e.g., abusive behaviors directed at themselves or others).
 - c. Remember that compassion is not the same as collusion.
 - d. Showing compassion for dads who may not have experienced it much can go a long way to building safety in the relationship.
 - e. **How Amazing Dads! addresses compassion:** The participants have numerous opportunities to practice self-compassion through exercises like the loving-kindness meditation, teaching self-compassion. There are repetitive messages for the dads to focus on using the information in this program *consciously* versus having to be perfect dads, encouraging them to give themselves grace.

A core tenet of TIC is approaching others from the perspective of “What happened to you?” instead of “What is wrong with you?” This is especially important when working with participants to address any behaviors that may be harmful to them

or others. “What happened to you?” is an acknowledgment that the participant’s previous experiences, especially traumatic experiences, are likely the drivers of any maladaptive behaviors or behavior patterns that the participant is engaging in. Recognizing that such behaviors are likely stemming from a trauma response is key to avoiding shaming and blaming dads, but rather it opens up opportunities to build trust and a therapeutic alliance with a dad which research shows is one of the most important determinants of good therapeutic outcomes (Ardito and Rabellino, 2011).

It is important to understand that a TIC approach that avoids blaming individuals for behaviors they have developed to cope with trauma *does not* encourage avoiding accountability or responsibility for one’s actions. Compassion and a therapeutic approach are not in conflict with accountability and responsibility. However, approaching participants with compassion will lend itself to a greater likelihood of real, positive behavioral change when coupled with offering participants needed skills and support to bolster their resilience.

In working to create a curriculum to effectively address the specific needs of fathers, the authors recognized that a trauma-informed approach was a necessity. Individuals socialized to being boys and men experience, express, and recover from trauma differently than those socialized to be girls and women. This means that fathers also have different experiences of trauma than mothers – not better or worse, but different. As a result, this program was designed to account for the trauma experienced by many of the fathers who will participate. Anyone facilitating this program should approach interactions with the assumption that each participant has a trauma history. This assumption of trauma history is part of actively avoiding retraumatizing the participants. This is particularly important when it comes to men and understanding that men are conditioned not to recognize their experiences as trauma nor to talk about them in any way that recognizes the incredible pain connected to them.

Male Socialization and Trauma

One of the more sobering realities that gets explored in this curriculum is just how entrenched trauma is in the process of socialization of young boys and men. Most often it is not *whether* boys experienced trauma as part of learning the Man Rules, but *how traumatic* that learning was to them. Multiple meetings within the curriculum address how the Man Rules are ingrained into young boys through traumatic means.

When babies are born, there are no differences between male-identified babies and female-identified babies in terms of their ability to emote, their desire for connection and attachment, their desire for intimacy and nurturing, and their ability

to be close to others. In fact, there is recent research showing that baby boys and toddler boys show significantly more emotionality than girls on multiple measures. And yet, as this program explains in detail, these characteristics are frequently devalued in boys from an early age. Boys and young men continuously receive messages that tear at fabric of this natural instinct to connect and seek intimacy via media (TV, movies, the Internet), peers, parents, and society at large. Each time boys do not live up to the expectations society identifies for “real men,” the resulting shame builds and builds, “like dust on the soul, dimming [their] zest for life” (Lyme et al., 2008). Shame is an incredibly powerful driver of boys’ and men’s behavior, almost never in healthy, adaptive ways. The repeated shaming that boys experience when being taught to navigate their worlds as “real men” is traumatic in its own right, but so often compounded by additional traumatic circumstances and events.

Of equal importance to note is how the socialization of young boys and men decreases the likelihood that they will admit to having experienced trauma and seek services or support to address it:

The connection between heroism and masculinity encourages men and boys to either cope with their vulnerabilities and traumas as trophies of manhood or act as though they did not happen. Social expectations of manhood to be strong, in control, and stoic define the responses of boys and men experiencing trauma. Loss of power and control and feelings of vulnerability and weakness may injure the perception of male identity and generate feelings of humiliation and shame, among other responses. Men and boys who subscribe to these masculine norms may find it difficult to process emotions and vulnerability. Acting out, avoidance, or denying unwanted feelings and thoughts in response to traumatic experiences may serve to maintain the self-image of “being a strong man.”

(Slegh et al., 2021)

Significant aspects of the epidemics of addiction (to sex, alcohol, and other drugs), violence, and depression among men and dads can be traced back to trauma and a desire to avoid acknowledging their trauma. That avoidance is often driven by their socialization to be “real men.” These are all topics that deserve specific attention, so facilitators are encouraged to explore them further outside of what is included in the *Amazing Dads!* materials.

Men with Trauma: What Happens Next?

When we recognize the prevalence of trauma in males, the next logical question is: how do we help? There is significant investment, education, and innovation needed in the mental health system’s ability to effectively support men, especially those who

have experienced trauma. There are important discussions to be had about increasing access to services and emphasizing the need for services to address trauma specifically in boys and men. However, offering treatment services is not the entire story. Services should be intentionally designed with the needs of the target population in mind, versus utilizing a one-size-fits-all approach.

Part of creating gender-responsive programs and services for men involves exploring what men really need and desire. Decades ago, service providers and program developers seemingly made assumptions about what men needed, wanted to talk about, and what would benefit them most. Luckily, in the ensuing decades, we have recognized the importance of not simply making assumptions, but relying on men, dads, research, and experience to shine a light on what approaches tend to have better outcomes.

Any treatment approach must recognize that a man's recovery, therapeutic progress, commitment, or whatever the desired outcome is, relies on honest acknowledgment that the men will be asked to go against much of what they were socialized to rely on for safety – the Man Rules. Griffin talks about this concept in much of his work pointing out that the Man Rules are effectively opposite of what we are asking men to do in therapy and the treatment process. Much of this “cognitive dissonance” is unconscious for men; if it is not pointed out to them explicitly it can easily be missed but greatly impact a man's ability to fully engage in his healing, especially for the long term. “This is the dilemma: How can we teach men, who are socialized to be incapable of sustaining trust, that their only hope of relief is to trust and to allow themselves to become vulnerable with their peers. . . In essence, when men enter treatment, we are asking them to challenge the very core beliefs they have lived by” (Lyme et al., 2008). The simplified answer to this dilemma is that we can facilitate men thriving in treatment by utilizing a male trauma-informed approach that places immense importance on developing safety through a gendered lens.

A male trauma-informed approach to working with men and dads involves the recognition that shame, trauma, and the aversion to admitting either are ubiquitous. By asking them to trust your process, or your program's process, you are asking them to place their trust in you. By consistently implementing the principles of male trauma-informed care, you can help the men and dads you serve begin to develop trust in you, one another, and their own abilities to be the drivers of change.

Why Focus on Fathers?

There is a robust, and ever increasing, amount of research available that confirms the importance of a father's involvement in the lives of his children from before their birth throughout the entire life span. Fathers have a significant impact on their children's

physical, emotional, social, and academic development, to name a few areas. The research on how a father's absence from the lives of his children impacts them is stark: children are four times more likely to live in poverty, experience two times the infant mortality, have seven times the risk for teenage pregnancy, have twice the rate of obesity, and are twice as likely to drop out of school, just to name a few (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2019). The data are clear: positive father involvement in the lives of their children is something to be promoted and nurtured for the good of the children as well as larger society.

Sadly, there is still a great amount of negative rhetoric, bias, and even prejudice against fathers in the media, the legal system, and child welfare systems (CWS). When we consider media portrayals of fathers, all we need to do is look at TV dads in sitcoms and commercials to see how significantly biased, and even lazy, the media can be in their representations of fathers. While trends seem to be shifting, historically (and still currently) dads are portrayed on TV as bumbling, silly, aloof, or even incompetent. TV dads such as Al Bundy (*Married with Children*) and Tim Taylor (*Home Improvement*) are examples of ways to depict foolishness on the part of the dad in those TV families. Look at pretty much any father on a Disney show. The same is true for dads in commercials: frequently portrayed as incompetent when it comes to household tasks, taking care of the children, or relating to others, dads in commercials are often portrayed as clueless, detached, or needing their spouse to swoop in and save them with whatever task they are trying to accomplish (Byers, 2015).

Looking at the CWS specifically, "Child welfare agencies historically have focused on the relationship between mothers and their children. This institutional bias is supported by the fact that mothers are recognized as the primary caregivers/nurturers. . ." (Brooks, 2010). When mothers are the default caregivers in the CWS mindset and fathers are relegated to secondary status, that messaging comes through clearly and disincentivizes father involvement. Understand, that means this bias permeates the whole system – from the way fathers are viewed, to the images on office walls, to how fathers are greeted when they walk through an organization's door, and the multitude of other infractions against dads. Less investment in involving fathers is a natural outcome of this mindset, despite the overwhelming research proving that father involvement has significant positive effects on the lives of their children. Fathers receive the message that their involvement is unnecessary, especially when they are non-resident fathers (i.e., not living in the same household as their children), which are exactly the fathers who would benefit from *more* outreach, investment, and involvement. Many approaches can be tried to involve fathers more consistently and make them feel like they are part of the solution, but it requires shifting from the mother-centric approach that CWS has employed for

decades. This is not to imply that mothers' needs should be ignored, but rather that both the mothers' needs *and* the fathers' needs should be valued and addressed. Recognizing that engaging fathers will require different approaches and resources is key to creating change.

When it comes to admitting to father bias in the legal system, there are numerous paths you can follow for answers. This document is not going to explore each avenue in the interest of being succinct. However, this is something worth continuing to research on your own as someone who works with fathers. For example, 92% of parents who are in prison are fathers. Mass incarceration of men, especially men of color, has impacted the fatherlessness epidemic as well and is a topic that deserves its own significant exploration and attention. Mass incarceration contributes to significant generational trauma and patterns that impact fatherlessness across life spans. Not only does it impact the experience of fathers, but the negative impacts of the resulting fatherlessness on children and families are significant (evidenced by the myriad statistics indicating detrimental impacts of father absence on their children).

“It’s not Trauma”

This is a common statement from our society: the classic refrain being “get over it.” But that message is much stronger for men than it is for women as it is woven so deeply into the framework of masculinity. The easiest way for a man not to have trauma is for him to simply look at his experiences and say: “It’s not trauma.” That, of course, does not change the fact of his experiences, but it does protect him from the inevitable pain of admitting to and looking at his own trauma. But what about the pain of not looking at it?

Men’s internal dialogue is not the only source of the, “It’s not trauma” message. It is very possible that men get that message from their caregivers, as boys and adolescents, when they attempt to talk with them about their experiences. They may hear it from others, even professionals who have not been trained effectively to deal with trauma. It does not have to be explicitly stated, either. Men’s trauma can just be ignored, glossed over, and minimized. Therapists who have not done their own work – or do not understand the complex interaction of gender and trauma – are great at that. The impact of racial trauma is so often missed if not ignored by therapists, especially white therapists, who have not been trained to ask the right questions or listen to the information their clients are giving them.

When men first begin to speak up about their experiences, especially if it relates to childhood trauma, they may encounter any number of different

responses. There is the chorus of other men and women who have their own reactions to a man talking about trauma. Some are incredibly supportive. Of course, some men and women are going to respond with derision to a man talking about trauma. It may force them to confront their own trauma, or it may be a new experience to them, hearing a man discuss trauma, that they do not know what to do or how to respond. There is no question that women, who have also internalized the Man Rules, can fail to support a man in their life when he begins to share his pain and vulnerability.

What happens when a man reacts strongly to the idea of another talking about his pain? Well, it is quite simple and somewhat obvious. It is *their* shame. It is *their* voice inside of them telling them they will be perceived as inadequate and weak. It is their inability to acknowledge their own pain, their wounds. Terry Real says: “Repudiating the inner vulnerability that is made up of equal parts humanity and trauma, boys [and men] learn to punish in others what they dare not risk showing themselves.” These are not bad people; they are simply wounded people who are reacting to someone sharing honestly what you are not supposed to share honestly about. Either they look at their own experiences, or they deny yours.

So many men (and women) are walking around with such deep experiences of pain that they have denied acknowledging to themselves – because they have been told for so long, since very young, that their pain does not matter. The toxic culture of masculinity does not care about men’s pain. Pain is something to “get over” and “stop crying about” not something to acknowledge, not something to heal.

There is also the collective denial in our society about male trauma. First, there are the “statistics” that talk about how much abuse and violence females experience and how little males experience, in various categories. This is not arguing against the rate of violence and abuse that females experience being as high as it is. It *is* arguing against the putative findings of the rates of violence and abuse for males being as low as they are. This is still particularly true when it comes to sexual abuse of boys and adolescent males by males *and* females. Some young men still view their sexual abuse by a teacher or older adult as a rite of passage or a “notch on their belt.” And we reinforce that idea in our social narratives in music, movies, and TV. The denial of experiences as being traumatic is so embedded in the masculine identity that is it any wonder they are not reported when they occur or admitted to when asked about on a survey or during an interview – often by a complete stranger! These experiences are probably not seen as being violent or abusive by the person experiencing it because we have distorted masculine identity development so thoroughly. Then, there are the high incidences of abuse and violence by women that men experience in their relationships as adults that almost nobody wants to talk about or acknowledge. The stigma against such men and the derision many of them face in our society that does

not understand the complex relationship between childhood trauma, trauma responses, and heterosexual relationships, and the incredible dearth of services makes it challenging for these men to get the help and support they need. We have a long way to go before our statistics accurately and adequately reflect the true reality of the male experience of violence, abuse, and trauma.

Finally, there is the refrain of “It’s not Trauma” that comes from systemic and institutionalized ignorance and denial, especially of marginalized populations’ experiences of pain and trauma. There is a systemic refusal to truly acknowledge and address the impact of how girls and women are devalued and objectified and as result abused, violated, and even killed. That is the Man Rules at its worst. That is the toxic culture of masculinity. Then there is the historical and racialized trauma that exists. What would it take for our society to acknowledge this trauma? It would require a serious reckoning with the history of this country and how oppression and violence are in its lifeblood. It would require us to look at all of the internalized biases we carry inside of us that we have introjected from swimming in the toxic water. It would force us to acknowledge the generational reality of trauma for some people and how that has impacted individuals, families, communities, and our country as a whole.

Toxic Water and Traumatic Stigmatization

For the longest time, when people talked about trauma so much of it was, frankly, white people’s trauma. Yes, there were services for military personnel of all backgrounds. Yes, there were amazing emergency intervention trauma services for survivors of genocide. But the dominant rhetoric in the trauma field has not been the best at recognizing the intersection of trauma and race and other aspects of socio-cultural impact that are often invisible to dominant society. That is changing dramatically with the work of individuals like Dr. Resmaa Menaken, Dr. Eduardo Duran, and many others. Finally, BIPOC individuals are finding ways to have a voice. Since the George Floyd killing in 2020 and the massive racial unrest, there has been a resurgence of discussion of civil rights issues and an awakening of awareness as to how trauma is caused by and helps to protract such issues.

Healing Fathers’ Trauma

If there is one message that this curriculum wants to make as clearly and stridently as possible it would be: men and fathers heal from trauma. There are incredible resources available now that were not available even 10 years ago. The science regarding trauma

and healing trauma has grown exponentially in the last 20 years. The interventions that therapists have at their disposal are nothing short of miraculous. The conversation around men and masculinity in the 21st century is changing dramatically: podcasts, books, movies, and TV shows. More and more men, many of them famous and influential, have been sharing their experiences with trauma and talking about how it has affected them and how they have taken care of themselves. Healing is happening, and it is absolutely connected to men letting go of the rigid Rules driving their lives and embracing a more conscious masculinity. Open men's hearts, heal their pain, and change the world.

Conscious Masculinity and Conscious Fatherhood

Dan Griffin coined the term “conscious masculinity” to describe the kind of masculinity that results from a more thoughtful decision about what kind of man one wants to be, coming from what he refers to as “enlightened choice.” Because so many of the Man Rules are subconscious, learned at such a young age, and reinforced throughout the “Water” of our society, the best solution seems to be a man stepping back and literally evaluating all of his ideas of being a man. Then, he can decide for himself what kind of man he wants to be, separate from all of the forces in his life trying to influence him and get him to meet certain expectations. Everything that someone has believed and learned about what a man is and is supposed to do is reflected against the simple question: What kind of man do I *want* to be? *Amazing Dads!* is ultimately about supporting men in developing conscious masculinity and then extending that further to conscious fatherhood. It means taking the next step of asking, “What kind of *father* do I want to be?” and then taking the time to explore that in a safe setting. The whole curriculum has been structured around helping the participants look at the different facets of their lives, all through the lens of masculinity and the Man Rules, to offer a different perspective. Our hope is that the facilitators, regardless of how they identify, will have their own journey with conscious gender awareness, be it masculinity, femininity, or any other expression that works best for them.