

INFORMING
CHOICES NI



Understanding Masculinity: Emotional Wellbeing and Men



Project Evaluation

My Life Goes On

Poem written by project participant

*The days were long
I couldn't get out of bed
There was so many things
Going on in my head*

*I had worked very hard
Over all these years
But living through covid
Brought so many fears*

*As a taxi driver
I needed to work all day
I had a family to feed
And a mortgage to pay*

*But Boris Johnson said
To stay at home and not go out
And that was why I turned to whiskey and stout*

*The drink made me miserable
I was very depressed
There were days when I lay in bed and not get dressed*

*I shouted at the kids
And my wife too
But it came to a head
When she said I'm going to leave you*

*So, I got professional help
And the depression has gone
And that is why I'm sitting here telling yous this as my life goes on*

Background

On 12 January 2022 a 23-year-old primary school teacher, Ashling Murphy, was attacked and killed while jogging along the Grand Canal outside Tullamore, County Offaly. Her killing reinvigorated conversations surrounding violence against women in Ireland. Subsequently Informing Choices NI (ICNI) were approached by a GAA club, Wolfe Tones GAC, from Newtownabbey to work with their male coaches to address this issue and to ensure the club is inclusive of all members.

In developing a programme outline ICNI were conscious that men are rarely provided with opportunities to discuss issues that impact their wellbeing. Therefore, we created a programme which enabled a safer space to discuss masculinity and issues that impact on men's mental wellbeing, such as social isolation and loneliness.

The project built their confidence to access medial and emotional support at an early stage, while also working towards reducing all forms of violence. We initially worked with 18 male coaches over a three-week period in March 2022. Participant feedback clearly showed that men felt they often acted in a certain manner as they felt it was *'expected'* of them. They stated that they had little to no opportunity growing up to discuss their emotional needs and indeed reinforced the stereotypical attitude that to show emotions other than those normally assigned to men was a perceived as being *'weak.'*

Participant evaluations also clearly highlighted that they gained a lot from having a safer space to talk about emotions, challenge stereotypes and express opinions in an open and honest manner. As a result of the programme several participants indicated their intention to make appointments with their GPs in relation to health matters that they had been putting off.

Following the programme Wolf Tones GAC developed their own Behaviour Policies and Procedures for coaches and members. They also established links with a local soccer club to discuss joint programmes focusing on supporting males within the community.

ICNI conducted further work with a group of young men from Ballybeen in October 2022. Despite the younger age range of the participants, they expressed many of the same views such as *'Young men don't get a chance to talk,' 'We never talk about our feelings'* and *'There are no positive male role models in our lives.'*

Making Life Better Grant

There were 203 deaths from suicide in Northern Ireland in 2022. Of these 156 (77%) were men. The percentage of suicides from Northern Ireland's most deprived areas (31%) was over three times that of the least deprived areas (9%). The Belfast Trust had the highest number of suicides (51).

With the increase in violence against women, and the continued high rate of male suicide, ICNI successfully applied to the Public Health Agency (PHA) Making Life Better Through Short Term Funding Programme in 2022 and 2023.

These grants enabled us to provide our Understanding Masculinity: Emotional Wellbeing and Men programme to groups within the Belfast, Northern and South Eastern Trust areas.

This programme encourages participants to examine their understanding of masculinity, the role it plays in their daily life, and their ability to become role models with an opportunity to positively influence those around them.

The primary aims of the programme are as follows:

1. To create a safer space for men to discuss issues relevant to them, such as masculinity, stereotypical views of men, male values, and attitudes around emotional wellbeing;
2. To create a safer space for men to examine violence in all forms, how values and attitudes contribute to violence, and the bystander role;
3. Examine male role models; and
4. To create a safer space for men to talk about actively seeking help and support around their health and wellbeing.

What topics are discussed?

In order to achieve our aims groups discussed the following questions:

- What is their understanding of masculinity, and where and from whom did they learn these views?
- What role do emotions play in masculinity?
- What impact do negative emotional attitudes have on men?
- What is their understanding of the term fear?
- What role does fear play in shaping our actions?
- How does fear create challenges for women?
- What is their understanding of the word banter?
- How can they safely challenge inappropriate behaviour?
- How can they influence others within their setting?
- What can they do to change attitudes towards masculinity and inappropriate behaviour?

Who did we work with?

We delivered the programme to 112 participants from Ballybeen Women's Centre, Bangor Academy, Carrickfergus Academy, Carrickfergus Community Forum, Colin Valley FC, DisAbility Hub, Glentoran FC Elite Scholars Programme, Greater Whitewell Community Surgery, Killcraggan Urban Farm, Larne Base and the NOW Group. Participants aged from teenagers to men in their 70s.

During the programme we utilised the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, which showed improved mental wellbeing for the majority of participants. We also posed a series of questions, as outlined in the following pages.

Before this programme have you had the opportunity to talk about male issues?

“Medical issues, yes, other issues, no”

“Yes, but not in so much detail and in a comfortable environment”

“Only with really close mates”

“Sometimes I talk to my parents or partner”

“Yes, with family, friends and teachers in school”

“Sometimes I feel I don’t have to talk”

“Men don’t talk about feelings or things that are bothering them”

“I don’t think about stuff like this”

“Men shy away from talking”

“I have never thought about it before”

“This has been my first time talking about male issues and it’s been very useful”

Our experience has shown that the above feedback is frequently raised among men’s groups. Men often feel uncomfortable when talking about their feelings, and as a result their emotional and physical health can suffer. What the above feedback also shows is that it is vital to create the environment for these conversations.

What are the main issues or concerns you feel men are faced with?

- Body image
- Bullying
- Drugs and alcohol
- Fear of judgment and fear of failing
- Having to fit a stereotype and be strong
- Having to create a fake image and be a 'man's man'
- Having to be independent
- Insecurity
- Lack of confidence and finances
- Life accomplishments
- Losing a partner
- Mentality of making humour at the expense of others
- Mental health and sexual health
- Not being able to open-up
- Not getting to see your children
- Not speaking out
- Pressure to provide, pressure to protect
- Relationships and family issues

Unfortunately, most of the concerns raised are common among men's groups. Health, relationships, confidence, and emotional concerns are all often masked and hidden behind a fake image. Creating a space to discuss these concerns will enable men to break free from the stereotype, to challenge the '*man's man*' image and begin to embrace masculinity in a positive way.

What do you think are the reasons why men do not talk openly about issues concerning them?

- Don't see the point in saying anything
- Nobody is interested
- It is a trait of being a man
- It is seen as a sign of weakness
- Fear of not being taken seriously
- Lack of confidence
- Shyness and stigma
- Scared of ridicule or judgment
- They isolate themselves and think they are alone

Do you feel that if men are given the space to discuss issues relating to them, they will?

- I don't think so, but you never know
- I think it really depends on the subject
- Maybe. They definitely won't if not given the space
- Some will, some won't. It's very individual.
- They might in today's world
- If it was to the right person
- I think they would
- Of course, they will

This feedback shows that when a safe space is created, men will open-up, and when speaking within this environment, men realise they are not weak or alone.

Testimonials

“The course was exceptional. The content was relevant to issues boys face in society and I would highly recommend this to other groups.”

Nathan McConnell, Teacher, Ashfield Boys High School

“I found the sessions very helpful and the facilitator put me at ease to ask any questions which meant I could speak openly about previous problems I’ve had in my life with bullying and sexuality.”

Participant, Killcreggan Urban Farm

“I learned that it’s okay to talk, and that I want my son to see that it’s okay to talk too. I want him to come and talk to me at any time.”

Participant, NOW Group

“The facilitator, engaged service users in a down to earth, informal way, that held the attention of the entire group. The guys from our service found him approachable, particularly, as he has life experiences that are relatable to their own life and experiences of being male.”

Kelly Benson, DisAbility HUB Coordinator

Conclusion

Our experience has shown that working with men around their understanding of masculinity has opened conversations around loneliness and isolation, suicidal tendencies, emotional attachment, violence, including violence against women, and difficulties with general stereotypical roles associated with masculinity and men. These are areas men regularly avoid discussing, often to the detriment of their mental and physical wellbeing.

Despite the age range between the youngest and oldest participants spanning several generations, as well as several groups comprising of individuals with a learning disability and autistic people, the issues raised were remarkably similar.

Men from all groups felt that they were never provided with the opportunity to discuss their feelings and emotional wellbeing in a safe space. This was described as a *‘generational thing,’* a *‘seen as weak thing,’* and a *‘not being a man’s thing’* across all groups.

Within the younger age ranges there was agreement that things had improved when it came to talking, but only within a certain environment, to

certain people and about certain things. With regards to mental health, sexual health, and emotions they often retreated to the stereotypical societal roles.

When discussing violence, particularly violence against women, they all wanted to play an active role to reduce this. However, concerns were raised as to how to make a positive intervention, in a safe manner. It was agreed that challenging 'banter' that crossed the line from something funny and inoffensive to something derogatory and degrading was a good starting point, as this would disrupt the acceptability of such comments.

A societal change and a change within masculinity itself is needed in how men and emotions are viewed. ICNI are committed to creating a positive change, and have outlined the steps we will take to achieve this.

Next steps

- **Create safer spaces for men to explore their emotions**
ICNI will continue to deliver our masculinity programme within various settings and will set up a monthly support group for men.
- **Advance educational outreach**
ICNI will offer our masculinity programme to schools, further education colleges and universities, and support teachers to incorporate these topics into RSE lessons.
- **Build the capacity of those working with men and boys**
ICNI will develop a bespoke masculinity awareness training programme to allow those working in this field to gain a greater insight into their understanding of masculinity, enable them to provide support around emotional and mental wellbeing, and furnish them with the skills to promote positive masculinity messaging.
- **Support men to reach out for support**
ICNI will work to develop a network of organisations that offer support to men, and increase awareness raising efforts to support men to reach out for support when needed.
- **Challenge male stereotypes and create positive male role models**
ICNI will work with relevant organisations to develop positive 'male ambassador' roles. These individuals will be from within local communities and sporting bodies.

I'm not good at talking (All's good with me)

Poem written by project participant

*I've never been good at talking or sharing my thoughts
It's just not me
Its easier to smile and agree, all's good with me*

*To talk, to tell it to expose me, the me that lives in the corner of my head
The me with hopes and dreams, if only he'd tell
But its easier to smile and agree, all's good with me.*

*I want to be open, to say how I feel, but in truth, it's just not me
If only I opened the door to myself, my hopes and my dreams
I wouldn't be burdened with my thought all alone
Crushing me, my hopes and my dreams*

*Yet my hopes and my dreams deserve to be heard
My words they need to be said
It's time to listen to the man in my head
To tell you my hopes and my dreams
It's time that I told you, all's not good with me*

*Only then will my hopes, my dreams, and me have a chance to be free
And I can finally tell you, all's good with me*

**Our Understanding
Masculinity project
improves mental wellbeing
and supports men and boys
to become positive role models
within their communities.**

Get in touch

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