

INFORMING
CHOICES NI



Understanding Masculinity: Emotional Wellbeing and Men



Project Evaluation

Background

Statistics show that more women are murdered in Northern Ireland as a result of domestic violence than in any other part of western Europe per population size.

With 0.43 killings per 100,000 inhabitants, this is three times that of England and Wales, with incidents increasing since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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 and as a result 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 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 that there is, '*No positive male role models in our lives.*'

Making Life Better Grant

There were 237 deaths from suicide in Northern Ireland in 2021, 18 more than the number recorded in 2020. Of these (74%) were men. A majority of the deaths occurred in the Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust area.

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.

This grant enabled us to provide our Understanding Masculinity: Emotional Wellbeing and Men programme to groups within the Belfast HSC Trust area.

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; and
3. To create a safer space for men to talk about actively seeking help and support around these issues.

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 or violent 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 41 participants from the Glentoran FC Elite Scholars Programme, the NOW Group, and the Greater Whitewell Community Surgery. Participants aged from teenagers to men in their 70s.

During the programme we utilised the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. 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?

Of those who simply responded yes or no, 75% said no, and 25% said yes.

Other responses included:

“Only with really close mates”

“Sometimes I talk to my parents or partner”

“Sometimes we chat about things in the Men’s Shed”

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

“Medical issues, yes, other issues, no”

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

“Men shy away from talking”

“I don’t think about stuff like this”

“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?

- Drugs and alcohol
- Mental health
- Sexual health
- Relationships and family issues
- Losing a partner
- Not getting to see your children
- Having to be strong
- Having to fit a stereotype
- Having to be a 'man's man'
- Having to create a fake image
- Body image
- Lack of confidence
- Not being able to open-up
- Embarrassment about talking
- Fear of judgment
- Fear of failing
- Having to be independent
- Life accomplishments
- Lack of finances

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?

- It is seen as a sign of weakness
- It is a trait of being a man
- It is not seen as manly
- Stigma
- Fear of the outcome or being made fun of
- Shyness
- Don't see the point in saying anything
- Not taken seriously
- Nobody is interested

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
- They might in today's world
- If it is with other men they might
- 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

“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.”

Aodhan, NOW Group participant

“The course was exceptional. From the outset the trainer was extremely engaging and interactive. This approach brought the boys out of their shells and allowed them to feel relaxed, at ease and able to share openly when required. 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

“Great material, I’d recommend it to any group of men.”

John Kyle, Former Belfast City Councillor and GP

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, and one group 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.

- **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.

- **Reduce violence in all forms and increase understanding around safe intervention**

ICNI will work with relevant organisations to develop specific messages targeted at men that violence in any form is neither acceptable, nor is it in men's DNA. Such messaging will also incorporate safe intervention techniques around challenging offensive and demeaning comments.

Get in touch

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