6 Ways Gender Binary Stereotypes Make Mental Illness Invisible in Men

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Trigger warning: Toxic masculinity, patriarchy, stigmatization of men’s mental health, sexism, misogyny, mention of sexual assault/victim-blaming, feminization of mental illness, emotional suppression, invalidation of emotions, and mention of the 2016 presidential election.

Mental health issues affect everyone, no matter how you identify, and regardless of if you go through classical forms of psychiatric diagnosis or work to recognize the symptoms of mental illness in your own life or in the lives of those you love. This fact comes as no surprise to many of us, but for some, there is a strong denial that they are affected by mental health issues. This group I am referring to is men—cis men, in particular. Cis men are tremendously underserved when it comes to mental illness, despite the fact that they are just as likely to suffer from mental health issues as anyone else. Our society, however, has created a nearly impenetrable bubble around men—especially those who most strongly play into the gender binary and patriarchy—when men do not feel the need to talk about or acknowledge their mental health. While there are many ways this works, there are a few stereotypes that rely on the gender binary and make it particularly hard to identify and handle mental health issues with men.

**Stereotype #1: Men Are Strong-Minded**

One of the most prevailing stereotypes relying on the gender binary is that men are naturally strong-minded. This means that men are more often seen as mentally stable by default, leading them to gain more respect and reverence with little to no evidence of their actual “mental strength.” We have seen on countless occasions where men are given more opportunities because of this alleged biological fact. This gender-based myth of biologically blessed mental strength also leads our society to think that men are inherently immune to mental illness. Men’s minds are simply impenetrable fortresses surrounded by moats filled with angry alligators that keep the mental illness at bay.

The biggest issue with this stereotype about men is that they are less likely to admit even the slightest of possibility that they have a mental health issue. Because of this denial, men are then much less likely to seek mental health services, something that could help men address the underlying (or surface-level) issues they may deal with on a daily basis but are never willing to admit exist. In some ways, the only thing that men’s “impenetrable mental fortresses” keep out is the idea that maybe they cannot figure everything out by themselves.
**Stereotype #2: Women Are Feeble-Minded**

On the flipside of gender binary-based stereotypes, there is the baseless societal assumption that women tend to be significantly more feeble-minded compared to men. This means that women are seen as mentally weak in most facets of life, whether it is in the workplace, in parenting, in leadership, and even in activist spaces that claim to be radical and all-accepting. Women are stereotyped as easily manipulated, especially in relation to men. Women’s supposed feeble-mindedness is a point often pushed by men’s rights activists when it comes to fighting for paternal custody of children, as well as when men talk about sexual assault victims as perpetrators of their own violence. This stereotype also leads our society to think that women are inherently more susceptible to mental illness and that women need more attention when it comes to mental health.

This incredibly terrible stereotype has survived for so long due to many men’s desire to minimize the chances of women feeling as though they are equal to men on a mental level. Men want to be seen as stronger, more intelligent, and more mentally mature than women at almost any given moment, which means the idea that men struggle with mental illness is made out to be ridiculous, while the idea that women are more prone to mental health issues is seen as a fact of human nature. These stereotypes rely on the gender binary to legitimize the concept that men and women are “just made differently.” ...Right.

**Stereotype #3: Men Don’t Have Emotions**

In the same way that men are seen in our society as being naturally stronger mentally, men are also seen as being better at handling their emotions. This can go so far as to lead some men to believe that they just do not have any emotions at all, or, at the very least, that men can hide their emotions in such a way that makes it easier for them to function in society. This stereotype is particularly focused on the idea that men either do not have or do not show more “negative” emotions. Men are seen as being able to hold back their sadness, or not let anger take them over, or not be an emotional “burden” on other people. Our patriarchal society paints men as being stoic, level-headed, and always emotionally rational.

Excuse me while I roll my eyes forever at this idea (and the rest of them, for that matter). The idea that men are just naturally stoic and emotionless is beyond ridiculous. Men often let their
emotions get the best of them, especially when they get angry and turn to violence as an outlet for that anger as opposed to actually taking control of their emotions and trying to talk it out. This stereotype of emotional maturity leads men not only to think that they do not need any help getting a handle on their emotions so that they do not end up negatively affecting others, but also leads them to leave mental health issues such as depression and anxiety unchecked, which can make the emotional struggles they do face worse.

**Stereotype #4: Women Are Overly Emotional**

Again going to the other end of the mystical gender binary, we come to the stereotype that women are “too” emotional. Women are seen as unable to control their emotions, especially when it comes to things like relationships and decision-making. Even worse, this assumption is based on the idea that women who menstruate go through such severe mood swings that their mental integrity is automatically called into question. This myth was used heavily against Hillary Clinton when she ran for President in 2008 and 2016, where critics questioned her ability to lead the United States effectively claiming that she would be inherently unable to remain mentally and emotionally stable enough to make critical decisions (side note: letting a whiny Twitter tyrant have access to nuclear bombs is perfectly okay though, right?).

Men use this ridiculous stereotype against women on a regular basis both as a way to make women seem “crazier” and less emotionally stable, and as a way to make men seem more emotionally mature, harkening back to the idea that men are seen as emotionless and stoic. Men use this stereotype against women as well to continue to separate themselves from the “feminine” trait of being emotional. Just as with the stereotypes that men are mentally stronger and women are more easily manipulated, patriarchal views of gender existing strictly as a binary force women to take the brunt of negativity for being more emotionally vulnerable while men continue to deny their emotional and mental health issues.

**Stereotype #5: Men Should Never Ask For Help**

There is a stereotype about men that I feel like most people would want to be true about them: men believe that they never need any help; they can solve any problem on their own. Got an IKEA desk to put together? A man will do it all by himself (he might even pass on the provided tools and use his own)! Trying to move a couch? He will move it by himself (or maybe with another bro-friend)! This stereotype comes out in relation to mental health issues as well; even
if a man is willing to admit that they are susceptible to mental illness or that they have some unfavorable emotional habits, men will often try to address these issues on their own rather than seeking help.

This can be a serious problem for a couple of reasons. The first problem is that handling mental health issues without seeking help, whether it is from friends and family or from a mental health professional, can lead to harmful behaviors that only exacerbate the issues one is dealing with in the first place. The second issue, and one that has a bigger societal impact, is that when men refuse to seek help for their mental health issues, this means that men are also less likely to speak about these issues with other people, especially other men, making the very topic taboo. Because of course nothing is better than keeping mental health a big ol’ secret!

**Stereotype #6: Women Are “Damsels In Distress”**

Well well well, who would have thought that there is another binary-dependent stereotype for women when it comes to needing help? And it is one we see every day in movies, TV shows, comic books, video games, etc. It is the ever-infamous and equally ever-misogynistic stereotype of “damsel in distress.” This stereotype is about as old as modern society, if not older, and relies on the falsehood that women are much needier than men. Women are seen as dependent on the assistance of others—especially the assistance of men—in order to survive in the world. Of course, this extends to mental illness as something that is seen as a nearly exclusive problem for women.

Following the same pattern as the other binary stereotypes, the fallacy that women are always in “distress,” waiting for a knight in shining armor and all, is perpetuated by patriarchal desires to make men the focal point of women’s well-being. Our society pressures men to insert themselves into situations in order feel needed. In tandem with that is the fact that men often do as much as possible to distance themselves from “women’s problems,” meaning they will continue to deny help for their own issues—including, and especially, mental health issues—while attempting to tell women how to handle their problems. And we all know nothing is better than being helped by someone who is not willing to help themselves!

**So What Do We Do About It?**
The first thing we must do is acknowledge the fact that the gender binary is inherently flawed.

Our society treats the gender binary as scientific fact and refuses to acknowledge the history of how sexism and patriarchy have defined the binary to benefit men, at least on a surface level. The binary works against women, trans people, and nonbinary people by automatically putting them at a disadvantage in nearly every situation they face in their lives. Men, on the other hand, benefit from the binary when they adhere to the stereotypes that have come about because of it. While it is easy for those who are not benefitting from the gender binary to question it, men are so used to the comfort they have in the privilege that they do not want to risk losing it.

My challenge to men who are struggling with questioning the gender binary and critically thinking about patriarchy and sexism is to listen to those who are oppressed by them on a daily basis, rather than ignoring them and perpetuating the issues these people face. (It’s called **empathy**.)

Beyond the baseline of questioning the gender binary, it is up to men to realize that they are just as susceptible to mental health issues as anyone else. While gender identity can affect the ways people experience mental illness, the symptoms depression, anxiety, eating disorders, personality disorders, PTSD, and so on know no gender. Even if you follow a philosophy of not specifically naming mental health issues, everyone can be subjected to problems that are best if addressed honestly and with the help of someone else.

It does not benefit anyone if men continue to deny their own susceptibility to mental health issues, and it is even worse when our society perpetuates that denial and leaves these issues invisible. The sooner we can learn to be honest with ourselves about mental health and mental illness, the sooner we understand and respect each other’s struggles rather than belittling those who are not able to simply hide behind a false binary.

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