Ask the Expert with Bill Burmester FAQ Sheet

Q: How can we help our boys tap into their emotions?
A: I really like the fact that we all play a role in what happens to the next generation of boys. A lot of the social assumptions about what will help boys become boys and men growing up are not always conducive to them sharing their emotional lives. The obvious answer is to simply be curious when boys share their emotions and to invite them to share more, because it brings their emotional lives into dialogue and into relationship. One of the most difficult things is that at a certain point in development, often mid adolescence, boys get this notion that they're supposed to be self-sufficient and keep their feelings to themselves; that often is peer pressure and is involved in them getting ridiculed for being too expressive or feminine.

Q: How can we teach children not to equate masculinity with not being feminine?
A: It raises the question of the binary we have in raising our kids. Both boys and girls are healthiest when they find a fusion of assertive and receptive qualities. Girls seem to be leading the way, just as the feminist movement may have lead the way for men to focus on their lives and their relationships. To not label what seem like feminine qualities as somehow non-masculine. There's a way that thinking in general defaults to either/or thinking. The left brain is set up to make distinctions so that A is A because it's not B, but that's fatal when it comes to gender development; in fact, people who are most mature and richest in character are those who can combine those two qualities. Labeling receptivity or passivity (a person who's willing to listen) is labelled as somehow not masculine enough because it's not assertive; those shut down. Those feedback loops that shut down kid's expressiveness or their natural instincts is not going to help boys.

Q: What special considerations should we take into account for transgender men who have been victims of crimes?
Are we talking about female to male?
Yes.
A: I have just had my first client, although male to female. I have been in trainings and I have interacted some with this issue, but I'm certainly not an expert. Women transitioning to men, I would like to believe, that's a more resource transition. Women already have the receptivity to know what is and isn't working in relationships. This is a much more cultural commentary, but I think women in general are much more entitled to be assertive and masculine, or at least to use qualities that have traditionally been thought of as masculine, in ways that don't threaten or challenge their femininity. Obviously, there's a contingent of men who don't like that and they will give blow back. But, I think in this culture, I'm a bit biased because I'm from California and I live in Berkeley of all places, but that's just the norm here; people appreciate women who are taking care of themselves, assert themselves and are active.

Q: How do men cope after sexual abuse?
A: The simple answer is they tend to isolate. Sexual abuse is a crime of betrayal, even more so in many ways, than a crime of physical damage. Obviously, there's a whole spectrum of sexual abuse. Usually, it's rare that a boy is abused by someone he absolutely doesn't know. This whole notion from the old days that abuse is perpetrated by men in trench coats who jump out of the bushes is erroneous and kind of damaging. The point here is that most boys are sexually abused by people they have trusted and reached out to, and when that reaching out is violated by being exploited and used, the message is that this kind of closeness is not safe and I'm out of here, and of course that will affect people in their partnerships as well. Aside from the whole transition that happens, Niobe Way is a great source for adolescent development. Niobe talks about a transition that occurs mid adolescence where boys are kind of falling under the spell of the masculine imperative to be self-sufficient. She's done a lot of research on boys before that age and they tend to value friendships a lot, then get talked out of that connection, closeness, exchange and reliance on an emotional level. What happens is that becomes an "I will protect myself to not be exposed". The irony of that is it creates a backdrop of emotional weakness and vulnerability that's supposed to be generating the opposite; if you're all closed down then you're supposed to be protected, but in fact there's still an alive emotional life that's getting no connection, nourishment or healthy input. We all know, especially among older men, how difficult it can be for men to be emotionally expressive, unless it's anger or sexuality or lust; those are stereotyped accepted emotional positions. My whole point is that it takes a lot of guts and strength to risk being emotionally exposed. It should be obvious, but it's not and that's what I hope will come out of this conversation we're having.

Q: In your opinion how can we approach the African American youth that associate being a thug or a gangster with being a man or masculine?
A: I wish I had more experience with this population, although I have worked with African American clients and kids. I think the thug part of that group is a protection. Not to discipline in the incarcerating mode when somebody appears thuggish, but we are talking about a context where we are in therapy or in a social service setting where there's a dialogue going on. Again, I would say ask them what made them feel like they needed to be thuggish, and staying curious breaks that pattern of "I'm going be in an authority struggle and someone is going to try to exercise power over me," which is the perfect recipe for somebody being so called oppositional because why wouldn't they be?

Q: If a man is sexually abused as a child, how does it affect his relationships, especially with his partners?
A: Men don't show up emotionally if they don't trust. Men whose trust has been violated or betrayed, don't trust easily. With my clients, I say this process will depend on us developing trust but I have to earn it, it's not just a given. I'd like to think that most women in relationships are sensitive enough to know when there's a blockage but I think it can be very frustrating, therefore there's a certain pressure of "why can't you open up and tell me what you're feeling and thinking," but that also can so easily feel like coercion and at a nonverbal level that can

trigger the experience of being manipulated or abused. It's a tough prospect to start that dialogue. It takes a lot of back and forth and maybe that means naming the process. Maybe the partner says, "I really wish that you could share more openly with me, but I see that it's really difficult. Tell me more about what gets in the way". Deferring to the authority of the man, also in terms of his internal experience, allows him to draw on what's supposed to be masculine, which is that we have some sense of authority and control.

Q: Can a man be abused and not be affected/not be aware?
A: This raises the whole question of dissociation. I laid out 3 different post traumatic identities- one where the victim imitates his abuser and regains his sense of control by abusing in turn. Another that the victim internalizes that attacker and turns it against himself. And the third one is where children use a natural capacity for dissociation where they either blank out an entire assaultive or overwhelming, abusive incident or experience and sometimes it's a complete erasure, or at least it looks like one. But the body and the emotional system of the brain (the amygdala hypothalamus) register the impact of the shock and that is triggerable later in life; that's the difficulty. So, it may look like somebody is not affected by the abuse because boys aren't supposed to be vulnerable. Keylon Dooling is the perfect case, where he was clearly shocked and overwhelmed and traumatized but he just made like nothing happened and made sure he carried his knife. But as you saw from what happened later, the residue of abuse is always triggerable. It depends how emotionally alive a man is. There's a certain kind of liability that comes with being able to heal, and that is that you feel more, so some people may be more triggerable. One of the most difficult experiences in my professional career is that I have had many men come to see me for the first time when clearly they're having memories or something has been stirred up and they begin to open up and the floodgates begin to open and it's so overwhelming that they then flee. It's a tricky business to work sensitively with men with sexual abuse histories because not all of us are perfectly prepared to deal with emotion or overwhelm, but women are at least given the permission to be able to struggle with it, whereas it's emasculating for men and they'll flee. Isolation is the biggest problem for partners in relationships and it takes developing a dialogue that feels trusting, neutral and collaborative.

Q: What is healthy masculinity?
A: I would say in a nutshell, it's an identity that welcomes in both sides of the binary- what's called feminine and what's called masculine. I would define healthy masculinity as a fusion and a balancing of those qualities so that a man in a partnership has the capacity to listen to his wife or husband openly when there's a lot of emotion circling, rather than bail or get defensive. I don't think that those responses are particularly gendered. I think that women are as likely to be defensive as men. There's a certain balancing of gender qualities where you both stay receptive but you make sure that you're both not going to get not heard; there's a certain level of assertiveness that's crucial. I think healthy masculinity has a big component of knowing how to nurture (I'm thinking of parenting) and that's simply showing the kids in your life that you enjoy who they are; that's not having to get too articulate or overwhelmed about it. It's genuinely finding the things that we like about them that are spontaneous and emotional. Even

if they're difficult and there's a show of energy or charge, that quality in a kid is going to serve them in their lives where they need to assert themselves. For a parent, uncle or whoever to say "I like that energy," and the kids don't need to have it spelled out, they'll see it in your face. I think healthy men seek out other men for close relationships, and that's certainly not a given. We are supposed to be self-sufficient and independent and not need anybody. Again, let me recommend Niobe Way's work on adolescence and what happens to boys as they're enculturated to be "masculine" in a way that actually weakens them.

Q: Many of the examples you've offered relate to men or boys who have assaulted by other males, can you discuss the effects of boys who have been assaulted by females?
A: This is such an important question. It's a real mind mess up for boys, especially teenagers, who are sexually exploited or used by women because they are both getting what they've been trained is desirable and so they are having a really internally adverse experience; they're left with a conflict that is very disorienting. I've worked with a number of men who were sexually abused by their mothers. Often it takes a certain kind of mental orientation, psychotic sometimes, for mothers to do that to their boys but not always- often it's a reflection of the mothers own traumatic history, and trauma histories have a life of their own; they're imprinted unconsciously as a pattern of behavior and interaction. Under stress, mothers can repeat what was done to them. This applies across the gender spectrum. One client was abused by his mother, apparently briefly fondled in the bathtub when he was 6 or 7; he had the presence of mind to say I hate this and I am never going to be in a bathroom alone with you again, which is pretty amazing for a 6 or 7-year-old. But he has never been able to sustain an adult relationship. He identifies as straight and he's incredibly accomplished so he has lots of support and esteem from his social world, but he's now realizing at 70 something, what a huge loss he's had. He's now working in my men's group to try to recoup some of that openness. One of the issues is he has become perfectionistic, so after 2 or 3 months, no woman is good enough and it's a way of re-establishing some sense of having control or authority and some standard that puts him away; he was beginning to realize this, much to his credit.

Q: How does trauma therapy explore healthy masculinity?
A: I would go back to the parenting response, which is not all that entirely different. Obviously, parenting is not therapy but there's a dynamic in which, at least I as a therapist, enjoy with my male clients who are abuse survivors and have learned to shut down their rage or anger or to be deferential or compliant- which are signs of assertiveness and I will invite that out. I might say, "isn't there something I have done that you have really disliked?" I will invite them into an honest interaction in a therapy situation, which should be safe enough. One of the things that happens with both men and women when they have been abused is they are trained and taught to defer to the will and control of others. It happens just as much to boys, but they often hide that piece. What therapy can do is to notice those aspects of masculinity that are actually healthy and self-protective and if there's an edge on them like working with somebody who uses their anger to hurt their partners, you explore with them what it is that feels right

about that way of regaining your ground rather than something that's more collaborative. Take answers seriously. Keep the questions going.

Q: How do you help a survivor who is afraid of his rage move forward with recovery?
A: I look for moments when men have an opportunity to exercise assertiveness but are holding back. I think the locked up rage syndrome comes from assertiveness that doesn't get to be used in a healthy, normal way, where that message of I better just stand back and be deferential and do what others expect of me is. If that's too strong then the natural self-assertiveness and rage or outrage of being violated in some way goes back and gets locked up and the man develops a fear of his own protective energy. There's a fear that he's going to go out and destroy the world. Like in the case of Dooling, until he was triggered at age 32 he channeled all his masculine expertise into the basketball court, but when this guy grabbed him and assaulted him, he almost killed him. Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to say I don't deserve to get locked up for the rest of my life. So, you do some reality testing around rage with men. You say, "what's your greatest fear if you were just open about what you were feeling, what's the worst that could happen?" In a supervision environment, there's something profoundly healthy about being able to draw on your assertiveness, whether you're a man or a woman, to take care of yourself; if we don't do that we can't engage in intimacy. Some people say if you can't say no, you can't say yes in intimate relations and that applies here.

Q: Are Admit, Accept, Stay Connected all needed to move forward?
A: That came from part of the presentation that I made, trying to spell out a solution for survivors who have been shut down by their abuse. I took this from other people's categories of responses to trauma and overwhelm. There's a way of moving away, which is the flight response that is hardwired in our systems. There's a moving against, which is the fight response. And there's a moving toward, which is attach. Most of us are familiar with the inherent trauma response patterns- fight, flight, or freeze (and that's the basis of dissociation). There are also a couple of others- one is to submit because it's a survival strategy that often works, and the other is an inherent one from early childhood which is to reach out. A child in high distress will reach out because he realizes how vulnerable he is, even if it's to the person who is abusing him. Needless to say, that creates incredible crisis and turmoil internally. That human response pattern to being in danger is to reach out and that's where I came up with the stay connected. What I'm suggesting is survivors need to be able to admit they were hurt, accept that the hurt made a difference and that they have a right to pay attention to it, but to stay connected as they begin going through the process; that's the basis of the groups that I run. I think the real work happens in groups for male survivors. You have to prepare for it by being able to talk about the abuse history in individual therapy, but men come alive and begin re-establishing their relationships when they're in a group with one another because there's a basis of trust; they all know that everybody else was hurt in some way parallel to theirs. It's an automatic kind of trust. Men just blossom and it's phenomenal to see. There's a national version of this called Weekend for Recovery that the organization called Men Healing puts on, where there are three day intensives that create a much larger community in which everybody

has this as a common base. If you're interested you can google menhealing.org as a therapeutic option.

Q: What is it that makes men disclose after so much time has passed?
A: Desperation- the sense that they're dying inside. Or maybe even in a suicidal state. That's the drastic answer, but I think also the media has done a fairly good job of covering the reality of abuse against boys, as it has with women. The secondary answer is support- the right kind of support, one that doesn't just treat them as victims. This is a crucial point, because part of the masculine identity is that you're not a victim so it makes it difficult for men to say, "yes, I was hurt and compromised," because the sense is that it's going to be absolute- that they will be completely disempowered as a human being. Support and curiosity is what allows men to continue to disclose. Often, it's a crisis. Men come in to see me as a therapist who works with men because of sexual abuse histories, because of a crisis in their life and they are in a position to make good use of that crisis. When I see them that's often how I frame it. I tell my clients, "this is an opportunity to get back in touch with the damage that you didn't choose but have had to live with all your life".