

# Men, Shame and Therapy

By Dr. Carol Drury, PhD, NCC



Only one-third of people in therapy are men, so it's not surprising that I am frequently asked, "What can I do to get my husband or boyfriend into counseling?"

I wish the answer were simple, but it's as complex as the men we love. Men fear therapy due to shame and not just any shame, but the devastating shame of failure. According to *Psychotherapy Networker*, men who've experienced toxic doses of shame early on will do anything to avoid re-experiencing it. Shame originates in early family and peer experience, and a shamed boy becomes a man who constantly fears the possibility of humiliation. These men are the most desperate for affection and approval, yet usually can't ask for it; instead, they reject intimacy and blame or think the worst of others. Sometimes the smallest signs of withdrawal of affection will trigger old wounds, and they'll suddenly lash out at anyone they think is "dissing" them.

Men have a profound fear of appearing weak or—god forbid—feminine, and will do whatever possible to exert their manliness. A recent study demonstrated the length of time a guy will tough it out with his hand submerged in freezing water depends on whether he thinks his masculinity is in question. For some men, their hand could fall off before they'd risk the shame of not seeming "man enough" to take it.

In order to understand men, women cannot ignore the powerful fear that being shamed has on our partners. Unfortunately, some women understand this and become masters at shaming their men as a means of control. Men, pay attention here, many of you don't get it either. You may not realize that avoiding shame is something that haunts you every day! A mildly embarrassing event—like carrying your wife's purse, can over activate a man's fear that he's failing at being a real man.

When therapy is mentioned, a man assumes he will be asked to admit he is flawed or needs help, openly discuss and express his emotions, get vulnerable, and depend on someone else for guidance and support. Wow! What man would sign up for that? Men have male brains and women female brains, and we must learn to appreciate each other's unique differences and not expect men to give up a chunk of their masculinity to accommodate women. What would we say if our men asked us to give up a chunk of our femaleness to accommodate them?

Men don't enter therapy because they aren't as aware of their psychic pain as women. Men are trying harder than ever to respond in more loving ways to their partners, to be better fathers, and to identify and manage their emotional needs more thoughtfully. Unfortunately, many haven't figured a way to do these things and still feel like men. What we end up seeing instead is often anger. According to *Psychotherapy Networker*, men's anger is often an expression of pain that women would likely display with tears or sadness. Men also "weep" by drinking, withdrawing, acting defensive, blaming others, getting irritable, being possessive, working excessively, becoming overly competitive, suffering somatic complaints and insomnia, and philandering.

I facilitated a men's psychotherapy group for a year. What a gift—they allowed me into a place where few women ever tread—the inner sanctum of the male bonding club. I marveled at the pain, confusion, uncertainty, these men shared. The world saw them as Alpha Dogs—but in the group, they expressed feelings, doubts, failures, insecurities, tenderness, and love. They found a safe place to open their hearts to other men and not feel shame. I saw them as men who needed to be understood and accepted for the less than perfect and yet amazing men, I learned to care for so deeply.

I wish I could speak to every man who is hurting, lonely, has painful childhood memories, unhappy in a relationship or job, or in a difficult family situation. I would include men who feel stressed, depressed, anxious, stuck, empty, joyless, lonely, or the million other reasons people choose counseling. I'd reassure them it's not about being broken, weak, or failing. It is about being human. Everyone needs someone sometime. I take my car to mechanics, my computer to technicians, and

when ill, I see a doctor. I don't expect I can cure all that ails my stuff and me. How many golfers and skiers have taken lessons from a sports coach and felt they were a failure for doing so? If it makes guys feel more secure, in most cases, I actually do more coaching than counseling.

When a man chooses to engage in work that's hard, unfamiliar, awkward, and even frightening—but which is in keeping with what really matters to him—we see a kind of courage and resolve that characterizes, well, a real men. When we recognize and honor how men communicate their caring, we can then help them find release from needless pain and allow them to be able to receive and give more in relationships. When we respect their defenses, honor their intentions, speak to them in a way that values their maleness, and connect with them as real human beings, we find that men aren't that different. As women who are in relationships with men who can reveal their vulnerability know so well, it's extremely rewarding to be part of the process through which a man opens up and finds that he still feels like a man, or even like more of one. He has learned to be truly powerful—not over others, but over himself. He has finally learned to express the feelings, thoughts, and caring he was accused of not having but that were really just hidden behind his wall of masculinity and fear of shame. \*

## About Carol Drury

Dr. Carol Drury graduated from George Washington University with a doctoral degree in Clinical Counseling, and is a Nationally Certified Clinical Counselor. Before opening her private practice in 2005, Dr. Drury worked for the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services for 27 years, first as a Rehabilitation Counselor and then as a Supervisor in the Tri County area. She was in the first class of trained Divorce and Family Mediators in St. Mary's County. Dr. Drury has been Adjunct Faculty at George Washington University and Bowie State University and currently serves in that capacity at the College of Southern Maryland. Her interests have always been in the area of improving the quality of all relationships, but specifically in intimate relationships and uses the Imago Theory of Relationships in her counseling.



## Carol Drury, PhD

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### Did You Know...

**Relationship counseling can:**

- Improve communication
- Increase intimacy
- Improve problem-solving skills
- Increase friendship
- Decrease arguing and fighting
- Improve overall happiness and satisfaction with life

