

**INTERPRETER OF MALADIES**

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# Men's anxiety and other mental health issues



Scientific studies report that anxiety disorder is more common among women than in men. There are gender specific social teachings that contribute to mental health problems in both men and women. "Fear" is the master emotion underneath anxiety. Suppressed emotions result in unthwarted energy (nervous energy) which tends to bubble up from time to time for an exit point. Anxiety can manifest in different forms such as generalized anxiety, phobia, social anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive behaviours, somatization (physical manifestation of psychological/emotional conditions) etc.

Before we focus on gender role contribution to male anxiety and other mental health issues, perhaps it would be helpful to shed some light on unconscious biases and how these transmit through generations if unchecked or ignored.

Research has shown that our brain uses "bias" as shortcuts because it can process only a small fraction of information it is bombarded with on a regular basis (more so in this era of social media!). This helps to shorten response time, bypass rigorous vetting processes each time (e.g., our brain automatically deducts sensory input related to anyone wearing sari as "woman"). However, these unconscious biases can become a systemic barrier to human wellbeing if it does not adapt to social changes. Static force of unconscious bias will invariably cause a friction to dynamic force of change.

Social stereotypes, myths, stigma, attitude can profoundly impact mental wellbeing. An intersectional analytic process helps us to understand complexity in mental health conditions. Gender based analysis shows how gender often plays a significant role in systemic oppression and mental sufferings of people. Besides gender, there are other social determinants like race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class etc. which can influence mental health status of a particular population.

"Gender" plays out as socially constructed gender role, behaviours, identities, and gender expression. Human physiology and psychology are often intricately interconnected in each social context. It is almost impossible to separate one from the other when we take a holistic approach to health and wellbeing. Awareness and knowledge are a good starting points for clarity on the matter.

For the sake of clarity, biological differences between men and women are not contested at all when we try to deconstruct gender. Men and women are

not the same, we can respect this difference while trying to achieve gender equity to improve mental health of both genders.

Gender is an identity factor. How strongly we adhere to any identity is a function of ego. Stereotyped gender role in patriarchal society can fuel some "male ego" but can also backfire on others. Gender role in our society expects men to be the provider, protector, rescuer, guardian, custodian, warrior, defender etc. These roles automatically fall on their shoulders as a child of destiny. Although they grow up with "male privilege" because they are destined to perform higher roles, many men fall short of that idealised male image constructed by society. Inability to live up to social expectations can interfere with self-image. Each of these roles also bring responsibilities and thereby stress and stress related diseases.

Men cannot express their normal range



of human emotions like fear, sadness, vulnerability etc. in fear of being judged as "less than" by social standards. These emotions are seen as signs of weakness and are attributed to femininity. It is normal to shed tears to mourn a loss. When we cry over losses, we grow. Social bias leads men to bottle up primary emotions and cover those with secondary emotions like anger, aggression, controlling behaviour etc. This makes them more susceptible to chemical dependency or other behavioural addictions (e.g., work, sex, porn, social media etc.). "Authentic True Self" tends to hide behind these additional layers of unhealthy ego, defence mechanisms, and coping strategies.

Social transition in gender role distribution can evoke fear in some men. Older men who were heavily invested in specified gender roles could experience

stress from mounting social pressure to adapt to this change. Unresolved identity crisis may resurface. Importance of men receiving coherent and consistent messages across the board (e.g., family, peers, media, institutions, court etc.) cannot be overemphasized to prevent role confusion and overreaction.

"Male ego" suffers from a sense of supremacy and entitlement in patriarchy. Pathological ego (detached from original source of life) defies any human limitations, resists humility, flexibility, and inclusiveness. Consequently, an ego detached from humanity and humility becomes more vulnerable and lives in fear of impending loss or doom. Heavily gendered men cover up this fear with intermittent anger, shame attacks, they berate others publicly to preserve their self-image. Ego thrives by creating division, emotional dramas and by

making enemies. Ego is terrified of being annihilated by "others," of becoming "nothing," "insignificant," "unimportant," "out of control," "not enough" etc. Ego needs are practically insatiable, and excessive attachment to ego can ultimately lead to isolation. However, during insightful moments, egoistic people also know distance between hero to zero, conqueror to loser, success to failure, and warrior to worrier, is indeed very short. This internal conflict or splitting can lead to cognitive dissonance and existential crisis, manifested in a wide range of behavioural symptoms (e.g., ego state dysfunctions, schizoid personality, borderline personality etc.).

Incidences of gender violence is often linked to gender status and disparity in power and control arising from social structure. Men who are aggressors,

abusers, bullies, perpetrators etc., are often condoned by family and society as men being men or absolved for having testosterone as an excuse. Consequently, they learn not to take responsibility of their behaviour. Parenting styles and family dynamics play a big role in shaping human psyche. A culture that promotes loud gender expressions also encourages men to make derogatory comments towards women. Historically, there has been negligible consequence or resistance to gender violence, macro and micro aggressions like condescending comments, eve teasing, negative stereotyping of women, rape, gang rape, sexual harassment etc. Anger management courses, correctional services, social skills training etc. might be helpful to many men who demonstrate these behaviours.

Men's anxiety of becoming a victim in gender violence is also a reality. Proportionate attention and appropriate measures should be taken to ensure gender equity. Establishing equity requires identifying specific vulnerable groups and addressing their needs to empower them. Equity is about creating level playing ground for everyone to access equal opportunities for the sake of social justice. Criminal-minded people, irrespective of gender, try to abuse gender sensitivity to achieve their personal goals. Sexual exploitation, character assassination of men should be condemned and punished by law.

Human dilemma is, we cannot function without ego while an unchecked ego is source of misery and sufferings. Connecting consciousness and conscience to ego is absolutely essential.

Collective ego (us versus them, men vs women etc.) is far more dangerous than individual egos. Collective ego operates through gender, race, extreme nationalism, religious extremism, politics of division etc. It looks for differences and ignores commonalities. Collective ego strives for supremacy of one group over the other. It is important to keep collective ego in check for the sake of humanity.

Finally, it is not easy to change the hard-wired programming of human brain but small steps in right direction can make a difference. All humans deserve freedom from slavery including slavery of our own mind, ignorance, and harmful unconscious biases. Egalitarian societies create room for diversity and show more strength as a society by becoming more flexible and inclusive.

**Photo: Collected**