

HOW TRAUMA INFORMS MEN'S IDENTITY, ADDICTION AND RECOVERY

“Men experience, express the symptoms of, and heal from trauma differently than women – we must help not only the addictive behaviour on the surface but also the untold pain beneath,” urges Dan Griffin.

Most of the men I've talked to over the years in the journey through recovery can identify some point in their lives when they realised it was not okay to express certain feelings or behaviours, especially if those feelings showed weakness, vulnerability or sensitivity. Crying, above all, was strictly discouraged.

They also learned – sometimes through everyday interactions with other men but often because of abuse or traumatic experiences – that the only way to express things like fear, hurt, rejection or sadness was through the conduit of anger and violence.

You might wonder “How is this related to the process of recovery?” On the surface, it might seem disconnected. But this is a conversation that all men in recovery should have with their loved ones and peers in recovery to begin to explore the connections between violence and the abuse and trauma they have experienced.

One of the most powerful breakthroughs in addiction treatment is our growing understanding of trauma. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines an event as traumatic when both of the following are present: “(1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror”.

Mental-health practitioners now understand that one of the distinguishing factors with trauma is not the event itself as much as an individual's response to the event.

It is very important to understand that, if you had a traumatic experience and still suffer from it, this does not mean you are weak, sick or at fault. When the serious effects of trauma go untreated, men in recovery – even long-term recovery – find that they are struggling with relapse, isolating themselves from others and their 12-step communities, abusing loved ones, destroying their marriages and acting out

in ways that damage themselves and others. A man in this place can work the steps rigorously, but the emotional, physical and psychological fallout of untreated trauma will keep him stuck in the pain, confusion, depression, anger and hopelessness of addictive and unhealthy behaviours. Those around him might see him as a “dry drunk” even though he has been technically sober for years.

Men are rarely encouraged to talk about their experiences of abuse or trauma, and our culture seems very confused about what is acceptable behaviour both from and towards boys and men.

One notable exception to this norm produced an amazing cultural breakthrough regarding men's experience of trauma. It started with Tyler Perry talking about his own sexual abuse and culminated in November 2010 when Oprah aired an episode focusing on men's needs. 200 men came forward about sexual abuse they had experienced. Even more powerful, their loved ones heard these stories, many for the first time, and were then interviewed for the show.

Only recently have we started to make the connection between the violence and abuse perpetrated on boys and men, how men are raised in this society, and the violence men commit. Every man I spoke with during the writing of *A Man's Way Through the Twelve Steps*, the first trauma-informed book written specifically as a guide for men in working the 12 steps, had experienced some kind of emotional or verbal abuse, and many also talked about physical abuse. A small percentage of men also admitted having been sexually abused.

The silence that many men feel forced to keep about these traumatic experiences causes a great deal of pain and, not surprisingly, often becomes a factor in their addictive behaviours down the line.

So, knowing that abuse, trauma and violence against boys and men are so strongly linked with addiction – and knowing, if left untreated, that the aftermath of these experiences can cause



undeniable psychological, emotional, relational, physical and spiritual destruction – doesn't it seem not only logical but necessary to create addiction treatment curricula that are trauma-informed?

It is a true honour to be able to have co-authored the first trauma-informed curriculum written specifically for men, *Helping Men Recover*. It is long overdue and hopefully soon there will be a general understanding that we must treat trauma as an expectation not an exception.

We also need to acknowledge that men experience, express the symptoms of, and heal from trauma differently than women do. I would submit that we as care providers are obligated to acknowledge the powerful role that trauma plays in men's identity, addiction and recovery.

Additionally, I believe we should offer help and healing opportunities not only for the addictive behaviour on the surface, but also for the untold pain, grief, violence and fear which underlie and feed it.

DAN GRIFFIN MA has worked in the mental-health and addictions field for over 17 years, in research, case management, public advocacy and counselling. He is author of *A Man's Way Through the 12 Steps* (Hazelden), the first trauma-informed book taking



a holistic look at men's experience of recovery from addictions (<http://dangriffin.com>).

MEET DAN AT UKESAD: he will fly to London to give a half-day workshop on 12 May (details at www.ukesad.org).

Image: Shooarts