

Silence

Breaking the

Men's Center Provides Mental Health Services Tailored to Male Audience

By Jean McAulay, Photo by Trent Foltz

Ever since the 1960s and '70s, a growing swell of voices has articulated the unique and unmet needs of women and children. Although there's still plenty of room for improvement, our society has become more educated about issues such as women's rights, domestic abuse, child abuse, work-life balance, sexual harassment, reproductive rights and a myriad of other issues geared to helping women better understand themselves, and men understand the women in their lives. Heck, today we've even got Oprah.

But have men been left in the dust? Is it possible men's needs and challenges have taken a back seat as the rights of women (a gender more willing to verbalize needs and seek support) have moved center stage? Is it just perception, or are men in the mass media these days more often portrayed as clueless and bumbling, rather than Father Knows Best? Negotiating their way through contemporary (and often conflicting) expectations of being a man, husband, father

and son can leave lots of guys feeling alone and confused.

Understanding the Male Perspective

Anthony Rodriguez, founder and director of The Men's Center in Davenport, wants to change that. As a licensed clinical social worker, and family and divorce mediator with board certification in sexual abuse counseling, Rodriguez is reaching out to help men seek support for life's challenges. "There are so many stereotypes and conflicting messages about how men should behave today," he explains. "At the Center, we look at the person as multi-dimensional. Women sometimes complain that men don't see them for who they are. But we have the same gender bias with men. At the Men's Center, we're trying to create a place in which men feel comfortable exploring their concerns," Rodriguez said.

He believes men are sometimes reluctant to access the services of mental health

professionals because they feel they'll quickly be labeled the bad guy or misunderstood. "It's generally not true, but sometimes men feel female clinicians will side with the wife in marital issues, for example. I don't side with male clients either, but knowing that the Center is geared to their needs provides the comfort that can motivate men to seek and stick with treatment," Rodriguez explains. According to Rodriguez, there are currently no other counseling centers geared specifically to men in the Quad-Cities or outlying areas.

Help for Mr. Fix-It

"Men want to fix things. They want to be proactive and work together as partners in their treatment," Rodriguez contends. He also says mental health issues can manifest themselves very differently in men than women, and counselors must be tuned in to these differences. Women experiencing depression, for example, often internalize the feelings and blame themselves for their unhappiness. Men often experience depression through externalization, such as blaming others or having outbursts. "I am striving to create an atmosphere that is highly professional and private and that involves men as equal partners in their mental and emotional health," he said.

A clear goal of The Men's Center is to help men take ownership of their experiences and strive to realize more of what Rodriguez calls their "authentic self."

"If you put your feelings on the table and take ownership of them, then you can go on to make better choices and reclaim your life, regardless of what difficulties you may have suffered in the past. I try to help men differentiate the stereotypes of male behavior they have playing in their heads from what they are actually feeling, or from what I call their authentic self. With that knowledge, they can build a better foundation and move on," he said.



Anthony Rodriguez advises QC men on a wide range of issues.

Navigating Complex Issues

Men visit the Center for individual and group counseling, surrounding issues such as communication and intimacy; depression and anxiety; divorce; domestic violence; fatherhood; grief; mid-life transition; and sexuality. Almost one-quarter visit the Center because they are adult survivors of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence. That figure is consistent with statistics that, depending on exactly how abuse is defined, show anywhere from one in four to one in six men have been sexually abused as children.

“There is so much stigma surrounding the issue of male sexual abuse,” Rodriguez said. Victims often feel they should have been male enough to fight off the abuse. If the abuser was female, friends and family might even react with jokes that the male was lucky to lose his virginity and gain sexual experience. If the abuser is male, victims sometimes wonder if the experience will make them gay. “Unfortunately, the end result of the confusion and mixed messages is that many men do not admit to being abused and end up being treated for other issues, such as depression or substance abuse, without getting at the root cause of their problems,” he said.

Despite the Center’s outreach to men, women are also welcome and many accompany their husbands for counseling. Family therapy is also available. “Most wives are happy their husbands are finally seeking help,” Rodriguez said. “Many say they have been trying to get their husbands to see someone for years.”

Through counseling services surrounding marriage, divorce and separation, Rodriguez helps men explore myths they may believe about marriage. He helps them identify and understand how their views and expectations regarding long-term relationships might hamper them. “If a man enters marriage thinking it’s a static situation rather than an organic, changing entity that requires an ongoing investment of time and effort, there will be problems,” Rodriguez said. “I help them see what’s realistic in any relationship, what part they played in its success or failure and to take ownership of the experience.”

Men come to the Center because they want something different and are perhaps concerned about the focus of conventional mental health care settings. “Men typically don’t want a lot of touchy-feeling words,” Rodriguez explains. “I talk with them in pragmatic ways about developing emotional capital and expanding their repertoire of coping skills.” 
