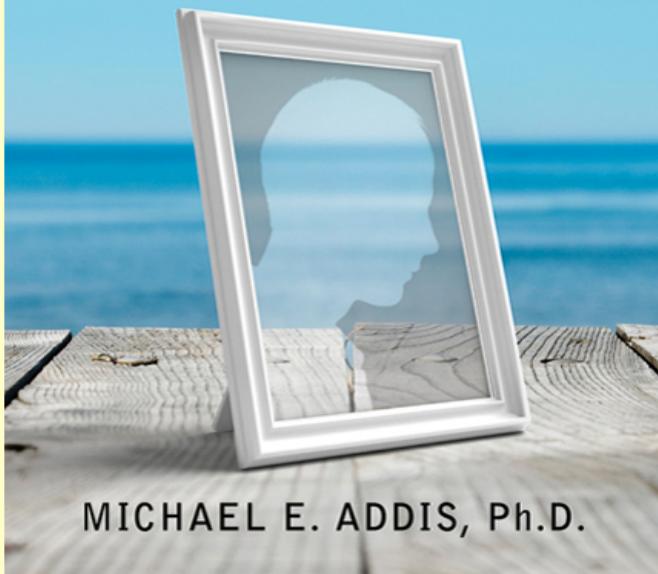


READ IT FIRST

Invisible Men

MEN'S INNER LIVES AND
THE CONSEQUENCES OF SILENCE



MICHAEL E. ADDIS, Ph.D.



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Invisible Men . . .

Who Are You Kidding?!

The title of this book may make you wonder, “Invisible men . . . who are you kidding?” Everywhere we look we see men’s lives. On television, in sports, in politics, at work, and at home, men are anything but invisible. At the same time, most men’s inner lives remain hidden from others and often from themselves. For centuries, men have been taught that their uncertainty, their pain, and their fear are not for public consumption; how a man really feels about his marriage, his job, his child’s sickness, or himself should be kept extremely close to the vest, except under the most unusual circumstances. The bottom line is that a man’s masculinity is measured in large part by his ability to make his public accomplishments widely *seen* and *heard*, while keeping his inner life *silent* and *invisible*.

This book is about the wide range of problems created by the silence and invisibility that often surround men’s inner lives. These problems affect not only men but also women, children, communities, and our increasingly global society. To some degree, the feminist revolution of the 1960s and ’70s raised our awareness of the damaging effects of traditional masculine roles. Yet despite

this awareness, very little has changed; when emotions are running high, many men still leave the house, go on long walks, or head to the nearest bar; wives still implore men to talk about their feelings, only to be told “not now,” “later,” and “this is not the time.”

The expectation remains that men should not get sad. They should get angry, watch sports, or drink, but they should not share their feelings. Research shows that many men who experience depression and anxiety have tremendous difficulty seeking help. For most men, admitting that they are suffering internally is more difficult than admitting that they are an alcoholic or a drug addict. After all, it is more socially acceptable for a man to be a “drunk” or a “grouch” than to suffer from what society deems a “women’s issue.” Thus their inner lives remain silent.

For this, men pay heavily. Recent studies have shown that conforming to traditional gender roles predicts aspects of men’s functioning as diverse as a decreased sense of well-being following prostate cancer surgery, lower levels of health-promoting behaviors, higher levels of health risk behaviors, and higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse. Men still die five to seven years younger than women, and they far surpass women in rates of substance abuse, anger, aggression, and violent crime. Recent estimates suggest that 6 to 8 percent of men will suffer an episode of major depression in a given year, and 13 to 19 percent will experience a major anxiety attack. Although women are twice as likely as men to attempt suicide, men are *four times as likely* as women to actually take their own lives.¹⁻³ It is quite likely that these problems will grow worse in the coming years unless something is done to break the shroud of silence that surrounds men’s vulnerability and pain.

ENTERING THE TERRITORY

I have spent the last ten years researching, writing, and talking to men about the problems in their lives. All of this work has convinced me of two things. First, men have a lot going on underneath the surface. Second, under the right conditions almost all men are interested in sharing what they are experiencing. This happens much more easily when both men and women understand how the silence and invisibility that surround men's inner lives operate.

Once you begin to open your eyes you can see the pain in men's lives everywhere you look. Sometimes it exists on a grand scale. Witness, for example, the increasing rates of suicide among returning veterans from the Gulf wars.⁴⁻⁵ Other times, it occurs more locally, and the veil over men's pain is considerably more subtle. The following story illustrates just how common it has become to ignore the realities of men's lives.

"CAN'T COMPLAIN"

I recently stopped by the local coffee shop near our university and ran into one of the staff members. I knew him reasonably well. We'd exchanged greetings and had brief conversations about the Red Sox every so often for over ten years. On this particular day our conversation went like this:

"How's it going?" he asks.

"Fine," I say. "How about you?"

"Can't complain," he says. "Work is work. You know?"

Then he grinned with that familiar mixture of 70 percent suppressed anger, 20 percent irony, and 10 percent real visible pain.

Of course, being a psychologist, and being interested in men's well-being, I tune in to the anger and the pain immediately. But being a man, I know my options for how to respond are very limited. I certainly am not supposed to acknowledge his inner pain directly. I am not going to say something like "You seem really stressed; how are you doing?" We simply do not go there. So instead our interaction goes this way:

"Yep. I hear you," I say. "Friday can't come soon enough."

"Oh, yeah," he replies. "I'll be heading out on my boat and knocking back a few."

I say, "Sounds good to me. Have a great weekend."

"Yep. You too," he says.

On one level, this seems like a pretty normal casual conversation between two men. And you may be asking yourself why I am making such a big deal out of it. After all, you are not going to dump an enormous load of personal information on another guy whenever he says, "How's it going?" especially in a coffee shop. Plus, guys do not talk about that stuff. Everyone knows that; it is one of the great gender truths.

But here's the thing. Although I do not know this guy well, I know him well enough to know that he has two young kids in school, one of whom has a severe learning disability. I know that he struggles financially and that the boat is probably an excess he really can't afford. I can tell from the way he walks that he has back trouble that must cause him chronic pain in his line of work. I know all of this because over time I have paid attention to subtle cues, and I have asked the periodic personal question. I know that when he says "I am fine," that's a way of saying "I have not lost it. I am still competent. I am holding it together." And when he says "I can't complain," that's a way of saying "What am I going to do about the pain in my life? You take what life gives you."

Here's what I think is going on. Millions of men are silently struggling on the inside, and they *do not have a way of talking about it*. Millions of men and women are aware that something may be wrong with the men they know and care about, but they *do not know how to talk with men about it*. As a result, we've all tacitly agreed that "Doing fine. Can't complain" is one of the few appropriate responses to the question "How's it going?"

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION

How can men, as a group, be so audible, so visible, and in such positions of power in society, and yet, as individuals, feel so disempowered and experience vulnerability and inner pain that remain silent and invisible?

This book is concerned with answering that fundamental question. The more you can understand about the causes of men's hidden suffering, the more you will be empowered to do something about it. The time has clearly come to take action. The first step is actually seeing and hearing the pain that so many men keep silent and invisible.

FRAGILE VERSUS BRITTLE

In 1988 I went to graduate school at the University of Washington to work with Marsha Linehan, Ph.D. At that time Marsha was one of the very few clinical researchers in the world studying the causes and treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). BPD is a severe disorder that affects a person's mood, his or her relationships with others, self-esteem, and many other parts of life. Marsha has theorized that the core problem in BPD is difficulty in regulating emotions and that many of the additional problems (e.g., frequent

attempts at suicide or other forms of self-injury) are attempts to cope with emotions that are experienced as more severe and out of control.

Over the years I became more and more interested in the psychology of men, and Marsha and I lost touch. However, a few years ago our paths crossed again. Apparently Marsha had begun working with people who met criteria for BPD and were also chronic drug or alcohol abusers. It turns out that a greater percentage of these people are men (compared to those who have BPD but do not abuse drugs and alcohol). Marsha got in touch because she had heard about my work in the psychology of men. We got to talking, and I ended up inviting Marsha to give a lecture to a recently formed special interest group from the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT.org) on men's mental and physical health. Marsha said she would be happy to give a lecture, but she was concerned that she really did not know that much about the psychology of men. "That's OK," I reassured her, "just be yourself, and it will be great." I was confident of this because Marsha is known as an incredibly creative thinker with a tremendous amount of natural intuition about human suffering.

Marsha came to the meeting and spoke to a packed audience about her experiences working with men. During the question-and-answer part of her lecture, one audience member asked, "If you had to say one thing about the difference between men and women with BPD, what would it be?" Like all good scientists, Marsha was reluctant to generalize too much without sufficient data to back her up. But she eventually succumbed to the pressure to identify a difference between men and women, and she said: "In my experience, women with BPD come across as very *fragile*. There's

something about them that seems like they are barely holding it together beneath the surface and they really need my help. The men seem less fragile and more *brittle*. I am not sure what that difference is exactly. But with the men it seems like if you reach out and touch them (metaphorically speaking) they might just crack entirely.”

I have thought about Marsha’s statements several times since then. I have often wondered about the difference between *fragile* and *brittle* and what it may have to do with the silence and invisibility of men’s inner lives. I actually think that Marsha’s generalization now applies not only to people with BPD but to many women and men who are struggling with painful emotions in their lives. When I think of something being fragile, I think of needing to handle it with care. I also think of it breaking easily, but also being able to be repaired or put back together. When I think of something or someone being brittle, I think of strength and resistance up to the point of cracking, and then total disrepair. I’m not saying that men can’t be helped when they have problems, or that they will inevitably “crack” if we reach out to them. What I am saying is that men’s vulnerability often seems more “brittle” to themselves than it does “fragile.” And if you thought that you might literally crack if you let go of your efforts to hold yourself together, wouldn’t you keep things quiet and hidden?

It is important to understand that for many men the fear is not necessarily of cracking and going “insane.” As one participant in our research said to me, “I do not know if I am that worried about going nuts. I mean, if I was really nuts, I probably wouldn’t even know it! But it is the idea of not being able to hold it together that I can’t stomach.” At first I didn’t understand what he was saying. But I slowly realized that he was making a very important

distinction: for many men the idea that they would not be able to hold themselves together, to be in control of their minds and their emotions, is scarier and more potentially shameful than actually “going crazy.” Most women know that “breaking down” and sobbing for a while does not mean you are crazy; it simply means that you are unleashing a lot of emotions. Yet for many men, keeping their true inner lives silent and invisible is not a game or really even a choice. It is a highly ingrained way of life; a survival strategy learned early on that has helped them to avoid the torrent of shame that often rains down on young boys (and men) when they let their vulnerable sides show.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

It is not just men who are harmed by their own silence and invisibility. Children and families can also be negatively affected. When men keep excessively quiet about their lives they are more likely to grow distant from those who love them. As many readers are undoubtedly aware, it is hard to feel close to someone who keeps everything bottled up inside. Children need to feel close to their parents. Silent and invisible men are not only affecting the quality of their relationships with their children, but also teaching those children, particularly young boys, how to handle problems in life. This is one of the major ways that the cycle is passed down from generation to generation. Work productivity can also be hindered by men’s tendency to keep their real lives hidden from others. It certainly makes sense not to blurt out all your personal problems at the workplace. However, when excessive silence leads to increased depression and anxiety (as it often can), productivity decreases. In short, when men remain emotionally stoic and

withdrawn, everyone suffers. Have you or someone close to you exhibited any of the following patterns of behavior?

- A man suffers the loss of a loved one and never grieves. Over the years he slowly becomes more withdrawn, has difficulty sleeping, and doesn't enjoy things as much as he used to.
- A man loses his job unexpectedly and becomes increasingly angry and bitter about life. Although he works hard to find another job, at home he seems less and less satisfied with life. His consumption of alcohol increases, and his wife and children worry more and more about him.
- A teenage boy begins to experiment with drugs and alcohol. He spends more and more time alone in his room or out late at night with friends. His grades suffer, and his parents worry about him every day. Despite their attempts to talk with him about it, he insists that nothing is wrong and nothing has changed.
- As the stress levels increase at work or school a man develops several debilitating physical symptoms such as recurrent headaches, backaches, or stomach pains. He angrily rejects the notion that he might benefit from counseling. Instead, he insists that he is not depressed, that it is "just stress," and he copes by drinking more alcohol than usual.

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