



Giving Hope: Serving and Supporting Fathers with Mental Health Challenges

June 7-8, 2023



Closing the Empathy Gap: Strategies to Reduce Shame and Stigma Associated with Fathers' Mental Health



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Strategies to Reduce Shame and Stigma Associated with Fathers' Mental Health: Session Takeaways, Part 1

- **Stigma develops from inaccurate stereotypes.** Myths have been perpetuated about people with mental illness – that they are dangerous, crazy, weak, or incompetent.
- **The “empathy gap”** refers to society’s lack of compassion for the challenges young boys and men face, which can lead to questions about whether investing in boys’ and men’s development is worth the time and effort. When society does not invest in them, boys and young men may decide it’s not worth it for them to invest their time and energy back into their communities.
- **Defining mental health and wellness** to reduce the empathy gap is the first step. It’s not about feeling happy all the time. Good mental health is the ability to appropriately and safely regulate the full range of emotions, including the difficult ones.
- **Self-regulation** as defined by therapists as the ability to describe, express, and manage the physiological aspects of experiencing emotions. Self-regulation is learned in childhood. Without opportunities in childhood to learn how to manage a range of emotions, expressing them later in life feels like an overwhelming task.

Strategies to Reduce Shame and Stigma Associated with Fathers' Mental Health: Session Takeaways, Part 2

- **The empathy gap arose because society is not oriented to thinking men and boys need support.** The thinking is that men have had more power and privilege. This has often led to a zero-sum perspective that funding for fatherhood or boys' programs detracts from funding spent on moms or women. Yet, the fatherhood field knows our programs help parents and families, especially mothers.
- **If we teach boys that their only value is protecting, providing, and sacrificing** and don't teach emotional vulnerability, self-compassion, and the nuances of ups and downs in our emotional functioning, we aren't teaching boys to grow up and become young men valued for who they are instead of just what they achieve, do, and provide.
- **When dads are at a low point, isolation exacerbates their condition.** Community is a valuable tool for helping dads feel connected and valued.

Strategies to Reduce Shame and Stigma Associated with Fathers' Mental Health: Session Takeaways, Part 3

- **The fatherhood field needs to devote efforts to improve our country's low mental health literacy rates.**
- **Providers need to separate the diagnosis label from the person they are treating.** No two people with any given diagnosis are the same.
- **Society has feminized depression** to the point where the definition of “being a man” is not met if he is depressed. Popular models of masculinity disregard depression. The fatherhood field can help normalize the concept that all of us (men and women) have difficulties and strengths. Society is perpetuating a dangerous message that only women should seek help.
- **Dads are completely capable of nurturing their children;** the fatherhood experience allows dads to get in touch with their emotions, which enhances their lives and their children's.
- **Expanding the workforce to include men in the “pink” professions will help** eliminate some of the stereotypical ways we think of men. Male teacher role models in early childhood grades will help our youngest kids understand the full range of acceptable feelings and how to manage them.

Strategies to Reduce Shame and Stigma Associated with Fathers' Mental Health: Session Takeaways, Part 4

- **We can reduce self-stigma** if we gain more role models of competent and engaged fathers who are highly invested in parenting to the best of their abilities. We especially need fathers of color to serve as these models.
- **We need to acknowledge systemic oppression**, the deep traumatizing part of our history, and how it affects feelings of vulnerability that have caused Black and Brown people to distrust the medical community. We need to acknowledge the context of trauma and help design a quality customer service experience and other culturally-sensitive approaches to engage populations that need support by diversifying across the counseling field (too few are people of color, an equity issue).
- **Learning people's family history and the host of issues related to why they avoid seeking help**, must be a priority of service providers and practitioners.
- **Effective strategies exist** for programs and organizations to use to increase the likelihood fathers will seek help: ensure providers attend to their self-care and manage their stress levels, foster effective referral partnerships, maintain established relationships with trusted agencies to provide qualified staff when your staff needs respite, "find your lane and stay in it," connect with external partners.