

Gender and Mental Health

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Identification and a sense of belonging are one of the strongest drives of human interaction and socialization. However, gender norms play a critical role in the influence of one's social life and development. Gender norms are the societal standards and ideas of how women and men should behave, look, think, and overall express themselves. However, these societal norms have the capability of producing negative stereotypes and creating unrealistic expectations for individuals to measure up to. Moreover, gender norms have the capability to greatly, negatively impact one's mental health.

When discussing gender norms and its effect on mental health, it is first important to understand gender. Gender is a socially constructed idea, that is, it is not an actual, physical and or scientific grouping system (Zevallos, 2014). As gender is a socially constructed idea, gender norms are subject to be different across societies and it is also subject to changing overtime (Zevallos, 2014). Furthermore, gender works on a binary system and does not take into account people who may identify outside of the binary grouping of male and female (Zevallos, 2014). It is also important to note that gender is different from sex as sex is the societal classification of biological and physiological characteristics of males and females (Zevallos, 2014). Issues primarily begin to arise when an individual's gender and the norms that are associated with that gender do not match with the individual's biological sex (Zevallos, 2014). Moreover, issues are also subject to arise as society has created gender norms that are harmful, even for individuals that do identify with their assigned sex and gender.

In American society, there are countless harmful gender norms that are placed on both men and women, however little discussion is focused on men. In society, men are expected to be strong, tough, and dominant. However, research has shown that these gender norms have inadvertently caused issues on men's mental health. Men and women are both equally likely to

develop mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, yet women are twice as likely to be diagnosed than men (Smith et al., 2016). Research has found that the possible cause of this is due to gender norms. In society, men face gender norms that tell them that they have to be “strong” and to “not show emotion” in order to be perceived as masculine (Smith et al., 2016). This, in effect, has led to more and more men not wanting to discuss their mental health issues and has also encouraged them to not seek professional help for their mental health issues (Smith et al., 2016). Because of this, men are also more likely than women to turn to “self medication” through substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive, possibly even illegal substances in order for them to “cope” with their mental health issues (Smith et al., 2016). Men are also more likely than women to commit suicide with around 70% of suicide victims being men (Smith et al., 2016). Moreover, there is a large underdiagnosis of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression in men because the mental health field and mental health professionals have also succumbed to gender norms (Smith et al., 2016).

In a study conducted by Smith et al., (2016), in which mental illness symptoms were compared between men and women, it found that while men and women are both equally able to develop certain mental health issues, men present the symptoms of such issues like depression and anxiety in a much different way than women. Men are more likely to externalize their symptoms through violence, aggression, and substance abuse (Smith et al., 2016). In effect, many mental health professionals will misdiagnose men with other mental health issues such as conduct disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, and antisocial personality disorder (Smith et al., 2016). Moreover, Smith et al., (2016) found that not only are men likely to be misdiagnosed, but they are also more likely to be underdiagnosed. It has been normalized in society for men to be violent and aggressive and thus, these symptoms of possible mental health issues are not

addressed and instead are labeled as “normal” and “masculine” (Smith et al., 2016).

Furthermore, because gender norms have been placed on men that tell them they have to be emotionless, many men fear seeking mental health help as they feel it would make them “less masculine” (Smith et al., 2016).

In another study conducted by Rice et al., (2021), it found that gender norms and their negative impacts for men start at a very young age. Starting at early childhood and well into adolescence, males are expected to be emotionless (Rice et al., 2021). Parents will often place different expectations on their sons than their daughters, many parents are indifferent to their sons emotions, and oftentimes, parents will tell their sons to “stop crying,” be a “big boy,” and “don’t be a girl” when their son is emotionally distraught (Rice et al., 2021). Much like in the previous study discussed, these gender norms that are placed so early on in a male's life, cause men later in life to not want to show any signs of vulnerability such as crying, anxiety, and any overall emotion besides anger (Rice et al., 2021). This particular study also found that societal systems outside of the family such as the media and entertainment provide negative gender roles for men. Many media outlets such as social media and television, often portray men partaking in unhealthy activities such as gambling, drinking alcohol, smoking, and driving recklessly (Rice et al., 2021).

Young boys are not the only ones to be exposed to gender norms at a young age. Research has found that from as young as the ages of seven, girls will form a conscious awareness of their body image and have an idea of what “the perfect female body” is (Savoy et al., 2022). From a young age, girls are exposed to harmful gender norms through their peers, television, social media, and even some toys such as the popular “Barbie Doll” that all depict the body of an “ideal woman.” Moreover, most children will often imitate and or look up to their

parents and a vast majority of mothers openly discuss their discomfort with their body and young girls are exposed to dieting and harmful body ideals from their family members (Savoy et al., 2022). As girls age into adolescence and adulthood, research has found an increase in anxiety and depression in women because they are unable to become society's "ideal women" (Savoy et al., 2022). Moreover, women are more likely than men to have other mental health issues such as body dysmorphia and anorexia (Savoy et al., 2022).

In a study conducted by Murren and Don (2016) in regard to women and their body image, it found that 90% of women will at some point in their life diet solely for the purpose of physical appearance and to become "thinner" as opposed to dieting for health benefits. The study also found that adult women look up to female models as a source of inspiration for the "ideal body." However it was found that a majority of models in popular magazines such as *Playboy* and *Miss America* are 20% underweight (Murren & Don, 2016). To put this percentage into perspective, in order to be diagnosed with anorexia, a person has to be 15% underweight (Murren & Don, 2016). One of the most sad statistics that this study found is that girls as young as the age of six begin dieting to become "thinner" (Murren & Don, 2016). Not only does negative body image have serious health consequences for women, but it also has negative impacts on mental health. In Western societies, "thinness" has equated to "attractiveness" (Murren & Don, 2016). In short, women are told time and time again by society that if they are to be sexually appealing, they must be thin. When women are unable to become or be "thin," they begin to develop lower confidence and self esteem along with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Murren & Don, 2016).

Murren and Don (2016) also state that men are not immune to the gender norms placed on their body. While women are told by society that they must be "thin" in order to be physically

attractive, society and pop culture tell men that in order to be attractive, they must be “strong” and “muscular” (Murren & Don, 2016). This particular article found that boys as young as 8 become conscious of their body and strive to be more muscular (Murren & Don, 2016). This strive for a muscular physique is linked to rates of body dysmorphia, depression, and the use of steroids (Murren & Don, 2016). The information found by Murren and Don (2016) is supported by another research article by Gardner (2022) in an examination of gender norms and the male body. This article found that 95% of college-aged males will experience body image dissatisfaction (Gardner, 2022). This article, much like the previously mentioned article, also states that while women who are dissatisfied with their body will begin dieting, men are more likely to indulge in strenuous workout routines and use steroids (Gardner, 2022). Interestingly, this article made a unique comparison for both women and men and how gender norms impact them stating that gender norms turn women into objects while they turn men into machines in order to dominate the objects (Gardner, 2022).

The last area of discussion of interest of gender norms and their negative impacts on mental health is in regard to their impacts specifically for people who identify as transgender or nonbinary. In a study conducted by Bockting et al., (2013), it found that transgender and nonbinary people have extremely high rates of experiencing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. In fact, the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and substance use is higher in transgender and nonbinary people than that of cis-heterosexual people (Bockting et al., 2013). This study found that the high prevalence of these mental health issues comes from a “lack of belonging” within society (Bockting et al., 2013). That is, people who identify as transgender and nonbinary do not fit into the gender norms of society. Along with mental health issues caused by gender norms, transgender and nonbinary people are also likely to face other negative

consequences of “not belonging.” The study found that 66% of this population will be discriminated against with 56% receiving verbal harassment, 37% unemployment discrimination, and 19% experiencing physical violence and assault (Bockting et al., 2013).

There is no denying that gender norms generate consequences for an individual's mental health and overall wellbeing. In men, gender norms have created barriers for seeking mental health resources, high rates of underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis for mental health issues, and cause men to feel dissatisfaction with their body image. Gender norms for women, also create unrealistic expectations for the female body which in effect lead to mental health issues such as depression and eating disorders. People who identify as transgender experience high amounts of multiple mental health illnesses because gender norms have taught them they do not have a place within society and that they are deviant and undesirable. From a young age, no matter sex or gender, gender norms will impact an individual at some point in their life. To reiterate, gender norms are a social construct and as a social construct, gender norms have the capability to be changed overtime. As a society, the issues that gender norms present must be addressed.

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