

**ALSO BY STEPHAN B. POULTER, PHD**

*The Shame Factor: Heal Your Deepest Fears and Set Yourself Free*

*The Art of Successful Failure!*

*Your Ex-Factor: Overcome Heartbreak and Build a Better Life*

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*Father Your Son: How to Become the Father You've Always Wanted to Be*

*Mending the Broken Bough: Restoring the Promise of  
the Mother and Daughter Relationship*

*To all the men who are helping the brotherhood  
embrace their modern masculinity journey*

# MODERN MASCULINITY

*A Compassionate Guidebook to Men's Mental Health*

STEPHAN B. POULTER, PhD

 **Prometheus Books**  
Guilford, Connecticut



An imprint of Globe Pequot, the trade division of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Blvd., Ste. 200  
Lanham, MD 20706  
www.rowman.com

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Poulter, Stephan, author.

Title: Modern masculinity : a passionate guidebook to men's mental health /  
Stephan B. Poulter, PhD.

Description: Lanham, MD : Prometheus Books, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Modern Masculinity is a practical guide for men of all ages to embrace their on-going process of developing a balanced, compassionate, and positive masculinity"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023033070 (print) | LCCN 2023033071 (ebook) |  
ISBN 9781633889422 (paperback) | ISBN 9781633889439 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Masculinity. | Men—Psychology. | Men—Mental health.

Classification: LCC BF692.5 .P675 2024 (print) | LCC BF692.5 (ebook) |  
DDC 155.3/32—dc23/eng/20230824

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023033070>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023033071>

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992

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## READER'S NOTE

All the stories, examples, and voices in this book are derived in part from more than forty-five years of personal, professional, research, law enforcement, and life experience. However, the names, places, and other identifying details have been altered to protect the privacy and anonymity of these individuals. Any similarities between the names and stories of the individuals and families described in this book and other individuals are purely coincidental.





## FOREWORD

As I write this, I'm watching the NBA playoffs, hoping to see a good basketball game. It matters little to me who wins and who loses, for I've got no skin in the game at all, but I do enjoy a good contest. I no longer cheer for any specific players or teams nor can I envision myself performing any of the athletic feats of these young men today, though I once did, and I certainly can't fathom dressing in their fashion trends! What I can connect to now, however, are the concerns of the mental wellness of a certain NBA phenom who can jump out of the gym, leaving the crowd amazed, on the edges of their seats, while he simultaneously indulges in gunplay at clubs, in cars, and near NBA facilities. His actions appear to confuse family, friends, enemies, and casual observers. Some ask, "Wasn't he just exercising his Second Amendment right?" Others say, "Doesn't he realize what he has to lose?" And yet others wonder if he knows he is a role model.

A local police department received a call a few days ago that a man's brother had been missing since January. Six months later, the missing man's vehicle was found in the parking lot of a major retailer. Among the heap of trash and what looked to be the man's only personal items sat his decomposed body. I was told that the deceased had struggled with addiction and loneliness for some time. The irony of the find was that the vehicle was parked directly across the street from the police department! No one reported the man missing for six months, and no officer suspected anything amiss, though the vehicle sat there for almost 170 days.

We've got to be honest. Men around the world have been struggling with mental, physical, psychological, financial, and spiritual health and well-being for a long time, and a good number of us have done everything we can to look the other way.

I recognized this elephant in the room in 2011 when I lost my close friend to addiction. He'd been struggling to come to terms with a humiliating marriage wherein he was relegated to participating in threesomes with his wife or watching her engage in sexual acts with other men. He was a father to a

young toddler, but he wasn't happy. The son he doted on during infancy was later diagnosed with autism. It was heartbreaking for him and just too much to process for his wife. With little to no support, they both sought pleasurable distractions to numb their pain. I'll never forget that 2:00 a.m. phone call when he told me he was doing well, and he sounded relaxed and optimistic. We talked for close to two hours that early morning. Six hours later, his cousin called to tell me his wife found him dead with a needle in his arm and my number queued up on his phone.

This gave birth to the Barbershop Group and my eventual meeting and subsequent work with Dr. Poulter and so many other helpers and healers around the world. Silent suffering isn't "manly," though we've done it time and time again. Many of us learned it from our fathers, grandfathers, and other men in our lives. Some of us learned it from mothers who were focused on survival and who thought that being a good mother meant teaching sons to be the hard, cold, calculative men they tried to love. We have amassed a harrowing number of traumatic experiences that we struggled to cope with for years, only for them to resurface in our marriages, workplaces, schools, and various relationships.

Whether you're a phenomenal athlete or blue-collar construction laborer, your mind and body matter, your thoughts matter, your health matters. If men don't get help—and soon—we will set ourselves on fire, and our loved ones may be resigned to watch us burn.

There is a choice, however. It is my hope that you will earnestly delve into the words found within this comprehensive text. Almost every aspect of men's lives have been covered herein. It won't be an easy read, and it won't provide a fleeting high. I promise you that if you take the time to dissect this alone or, hopefully, with other men and possibly even a therapist, you will begin to experience new life.

Until we meet, love you and love your people more,

—Charles Catchings, founder, the Barbershop Group

## FOREWORD

**M**y sons just left for a Yankees–Dodgers game with their father, and I’m at home with my husband and my two spoiled dogs, both male. I’ve spent a better part of my adult life surrounded by males, and I like it that way. I didn’t know the gender of my kids before they were born, but my standing joke is “God knew I wanted boys.” I grew up with a sister and two brothers who were much younger than my sister and me, so it felt like I was able to “practice” with them.

Parenthood is full of challenges, but one consistent goal in my eighteen-year parenting journey has been to remind both my sons every day that they are important, strong, capable, and not inherently faulty people. For as long as I can remember, the narrative with boys has been that—in comparison to girls—they are “immature,” “behind,” “rowdy,” “rough,” and “detached.” When I applied for preschool for my oldest son, several mothers told me to hold him back because of his summer birthday, a common practice called “redshirting.” They assured me that he’d be too young once schooling moved along. I followed my instincts and enrolled him, and at no point in his now-finished high school career did he prove to be unready.

Being a mother, wife, and daughter who cherishes the men in her life, hearing this negative notion that men are “toxic” or “aggressive” feels misdirected on every level. Men have played an enormous part in my success as an adult. I feel a duty to defend the notion of masculinity since it’s not a negative thing but a necessary part of modern society. Men’s mental health matters.

Our society has placed men and women in two different categories when it comes to emotional learning and intelligence. It’s held that one side—the female—works on it and the other side—the male—does not. But as human beings, we all strive to be better versions of ourselves, and it’s time to include men in this dialogue.

The day my oldest son came to me during the school lockdowns of 2020 and said, “Mom, I think I need someone to talk to who isn’t you,” I felt a wave of emotion. But I wasn’t only sad about the aloneness that I knew he felt, I was

also proud of him. He was able to move past the cultural expectations of just “sucking it up” and “getting on with it.” It was then that our family was introduced to Dr. Poulter, and he’s been a beacon of healthy masculinity for our family ever since.

We women who love men want to help them. If we could heal what’s causing them pain, we would. But we can’t unless there’s a bridge we can use to bring the two sides together. We females who have fathers, uncles, brothers, sons, neighbors, husbands, and other men in our lives and who long for a guide to male mental health now have that: a book to keep on our shelves that can help us do that.

Putting in the work it takes to get ourselves to a healthy place is not always easy, but it’s worth it. This book offers a step-by-step guide to a more stable life and a full emotional bank account.

All men deserve to be seen and understood. We women see you, we care, and we need you.

—Angela DiGaetano, mother, wife, and supporter of men

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge all the men in my life (past and present) who have pushed me to be a better man. I want to acknowledge the integral woman in my life who has pushed me to be my best self: my wife Miriam.

Miriam has been telling me for years that I need to address the father-son masculine crisis, as has my fellow therapist Charles Catchings. Sincere thanks to Jake Bonar for taking my phone calls and believing in our process. These three people were incredibly supportive and compassionate. Thank you to all the mothers, wives, and daughters who have expressed concern for their men and worried about them. Thank you to my family near and far who believe in me and don't always understand me.

There are too many names to list, but I need to mention a few who have been instrumental in my growth over the last twenty-five years: Barry Weichman, Jim Myerson, Brad Jenkins, Chris L. Casey, Carter Felts, my two sons, my two daughters, my clients, my three beagles, and the brotherhood.



*Part I*

**BODY MASCULINITY**

*The Mind-Body Connection—Physical Health  
Is Emotional and Mental Health*

*Ever notice how a guy won't go to the doctor unless his arm  
or penis is broken?—Dr. Jesse N. Mills, MD, founder of the  
Men's Health Clinic at University of California at Los Angeles*





## LIVING YOUR BEST LIFE PHYSICALLY

### How Everything Connects Emotionally and Psychologically to Your Body

*Your health is everything, son, and when you have your health, you have everything.*—Peter Brett Poulter (1924–2007); my father’s sage advice to me

#### A CAUTIONARY TALE—WHAT IS YOUR BODY SAYING TO YOU?

Roy is a twenty-seven-year-old single male bodybuilder who takes growth hormones intravenously (aka bodybuilding steroids) to maximize his workout results—increased muscle size. Roy has a fast-paced tech sales job that requires him to be at his best emotionally, occupationally, and psychologically. Roy believes that looking “jacked”—muscular—is how men truly judge his masculinity, manhood, business competency, and capabilities. This male stereotype is something we are going to tackle: the appearance of strength doesn’t necessarily imply that the man is mentally balanced.

Roy works out six days a week and is a self-described “gym rat.” Roy is critical of other guys in the gym: how much they lift, their strength, and muscle size. Roy’s father, Mark, also is a gym rat and a bodybuilder in his late sixties. Their father-son relationship has been a deep source of emotional pain for Roy, who, at fifteen, punched his father in the throat when Mark called him a “pussy” for crying after losing his football championship game. Roy made an unspoken pledge to himself that he would never allow anyone to bully or abuse him ever again. Personal oaths, conscious and unconscious, shape our lives (more about this later). Roy’s spoken and unspoken oath of self-protection is the foundational glue of his life. Everything Roy does is shaped by his internal self-defense mechanism.

One of his safeguards against being “weak” or a “victim” was to become “jacked physically.” Roy’s top priority in his life is his physical appearance (he

dyes his hair and wears only designer menswear) and his workouts (he trains even when he's sick). Everything else is secondary to his workout regimen including his girlfriend, personal and family relationships, emotions, and feelings. Roy thinks that all the stuff that psychologists discuss is not really important or necessary for a successful life. Roy believes that “psychobabble” distracts from his life force.

Roy's personal mantra, “Get over it,” applies to issues in the past that are not relevant today and have no impact on his present day. (I don't believe that Roy truly believes this, although it is what he tells others.) Roy prides himself on not being a “whiner” or a “crybaby” about his life. At the end of this chapter, we return to Roy because his body says a lot about his unexplored psychology, emotional repression, suppression of his childhood trauma, and chronic use of steroids.

## YOUR HEALTH IS NOT IN A VACUUM

Our operating theme in part I is that your (young, middle-aged, dad, or older man) body is more than a biological phenomenon operating independently of your day-to-day living. Rather, your body is a complex system interacting with all the conscious and unconscious parts of your life at various levels of immediate awareness. This fact is sometimes good news and sometimes not-so-good news. The question that begs to be asked by any medical, mental health, or psychological professional is: what's going on in your life and body? The answer isn't one-dimensional, but rather three-dimensional, with many factors contributing to the answer.

One of our goals in redefining modern masculinity is starting with your body, a critical part of your mental health and overall quality of life. Without body awareness, it is very difficult to maintain any type of mental health balance and functioning. *It is simply impossible to achieve any significant psychological change, healing, or resolution without body awareness.* Increasing conscious awareness of how our thoughts, feelings, anger, excitement, daily habits, diet, negative self-talk, drinking, sleeping, recreational drug use, relationships, and everyday activities are all interconnected. They impact our heart, blood pressure, liver, back, muscular structure, immune

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***Your body awareness is part of your mental health awareness.***

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system, brain functioning, and sex drive; the list is endless. Everything in our bodies' functioning—from prenatal, childhood, adolescents, midlife, aging, and our senior years (if we are blessed with a healthy long life)—is connected.

Gentlemen, we can no longer wait for our bodies to signal crisis to take notice. The sense of invincibility is more than a young man's fantasy; rather, it's the delusional foundational cement of the "macho" masculine model. This all-too-common male model is the adolescent belief that you are more powerful than life and will defeat Father Time. No one escapes the natural evolution of life—no one! Even the tough young dude who becomes gray haired one day. The wisdom of experience and heartbreak teaches compassion, which is passed on to younger men. Respecting Father Time and your natural cycle of life is psychological acceptance that allows for the potential of living our best life. Your mental health starts with understanding your body's messages and signals to you.

Let's take a timeout to consider some of the more obvious and not-so-obvious signs of male health and contemplate another side of the mind-body dynamic.

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***Psychological fact:  
Denial breeds confusion;  
acceptance breeds  
potential!***

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It is common knowledge in the medical field that women are more likely to seek out medical attention prior to a physical crisis than men. Dr. Mills so accurately stated in his quote at the beginning of this chapter that men (me included) tend to seek out medical treatment as a reaction (erectile dysfunction or body part falling off) rather than a preventive measure. When your knee isn't moving, penis is not working properly, or we are knocked out with the flu, it's amazing how we suddenly find time to make that doctor's appointment. The reasons vary; men avoid their health because they don't have time, money, or a good doctor. Before we go any further, I want to recommend an excellent book for practical, male-oriented medical practices: *A Field Guide to Men's Health*, by Dr. Mills, explores science and medical issues surrounding men's physical health. Dr. Mills addresses some common medical questions that men have and do not ask about regarding testosterone, diet, sexual functioning, prostate cancer, and many more. Science and all aspects of men's mental health are interwoven. You can't separate white and red blood cells and say they are independent of each other any more than you can separate your mental health from your physical health—it's impossible.

We focus on decoding your body's signals to you—positive, troubling, or whatever is happening in your outside or inside life. The catch is to be proactive and recognize that something might be off in your life on more levels than just the physical. Your body is a complex system that interacts with all of you—it sounds obvious until he (your body) stops performing at its normal pace-level of excellence. Your emotions, mental processes, thoughts, eating,

sleeping, and work life are all teammates on your field of life. These players literally and figuratively combine, creating your own mind-body mental health fitness level. Ultimately at some point in your life, this powerful connection within will grab your full attention. No one is exempt. Don't be scared if your health isn't perfect; things happen along the way in your life.

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***Medical truism: The term disease literally means the absence of ease within your body, that your body isn't functioning properly.***

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The study of the mind-body connection dates back to ancient Chinese medicine more than five thousand years ago. This idea of the mind-body relationship isn't new but a dynamic for men to embrace. Why the interest then and today? Eastern medicine and now Western medicine recognize that all the elements in your life impact each other. The term *disease* literally means that there is imbalance and uneasiness with your mind-body system. The disharmony creates all types of issues for men besides physical—relational, professional, family, financial, health, sexual, and personal. The list of variables is endless as is the impact on your day-to-day routine, choices, and future.

### **MEN'S FEAR AND AVOIDANCE OF MEDICINE: A COMMON SPOKEN AND UNSPOKEN ISSUE**

I address some of the perplexing questions about men's medical health that most men dismiss as trivial and irrelevant in their day-to-day life until they are sick in bed. The terms such as "heartbreak" and "emotionally crushed" are now recognized as mental and physical health issues for men. Over the years, I have had several men experience the onset of cardiac arrest (heart attack) in my office while talking about an ex-wife, a heartbreaking experience, or a significant romantic loss. The sudden onset of physical symptoms come on in a serious, painful, frightening manner.

My male clients, ages twenty-eight, thirty-six, and forty-four, were all in seemingly good health then suddenly felt enormous chest pain pressure (like someone was sitting on their chest), tingling sensation in their arms, and shortness of breath. All three men wondered out loud if they were having a heart attack or a panic attack. Their physical symptoms began escalating—more chest pain and dizziness. The panic attack idea was dismissed by all three men, who had previously suffered them. Each of these men immediately sought emergency medical treatment; ironically, they had no hesitation seeking medical help in that moment.

Fortunately, getting immediate medical attention saved each of their lives, per their own admission in the following months. At the onset of their heart attacks, all three men were discussing their feelings of anger, hopelessness, and psychological loss when their bodies signaled trouble. It's interesting to note that each of the guys told me later that they had felt similar physical and emotional sensations days prior to their heart attacks and ignored them.

### **Question 1: Have You Noticed a Physical Sensation in Your Body while Talking about Emotionally Charged Issues?**

Full disclosure: I am included among the majority of men who postpone their preventive medical care. Like the majority of the brotherhood, I didn't have time; my insurance deductible was high; I was building my psychological practice; and whatever excuses worked. I tore my vertebral artery at the base of my neck running and had a stroke that almost ended my life. I was completely paralyzed on the right side of my body within ten seconds. I knew I was dying (people know this during a near-death experience) and internally pleaded with my higher self to spare my life.

During the first forty-eight hours, I fortunately regained about 95 percent of my movement. I spent the following eight days in the intensive care unit, which felt like eight months. Needless to say, every doctor I met during my week in the hospital lectured me. They all told me how lucky I was not to be permanently paralyzed or dead (all movement fully came back to my body within a week). This medical crisis changed the course of my life; the psychological issues of avoidance, maintaining proper health, work-life balance, father-son issues, and a host of buried issues all resurfaced as I lay in the hospital.

After my brush with death, I had to ask myself what else was I running from. All that I knew when I left the hospital was that I never wanted to have a stroke—or anything like it—again. It took six months before I felt as if I was fully back in my body again.

Think about the three questions posed in this chapter. What is your first answer—not the proper response but the one in your gut? Make a mental note of your answer or write in the margin or at the end of this chapter. These questions can be helpful in reconnecting with lost or forgotten parts of your life. Your body is as important as your ability to think clearly and to function personally and professionally at your highest level.

### **Question 2: What Is Your Body Currently Saying to You?**

Getting back to our mind-body connection is part of the masculine journey of developing balance and fulfillment, which all men address at some point in

their lives. Women are typically more attuned to their bodies with monthly reminders about having babies someday. Men tend to rely on a crisis to address their health (both body and dental), as I am guilty of doing.

Years ago in California, smoking was allowed indoors, in restaurants, and basically anywhere else. Then legislators realized, per the medical community, that second-hand cigarette smoke was also a public health hazard, along with smoking. The concept of smoking and nonsmoking sections in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs was introduced. Within a short period of time, it became abundantly clear that smoke permeated any area regardless of ventilation. The conclusion: it is impossible to prevent cigarette smoke from filtering into other areas of a room. Soon, all public indoor smoking was banned in California. The take-away message of this obvious issue is that you cannot separate smoke from the nonsmoking areas—it simply does not work. Nor can we separate our emotional, psychological, and mental health from our physical health—it is simply not possible. Hence your mind-body connection is impossible to separate.

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***Your mental health and your physical health cannot be separated.***

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Chinese medicine is based on this fundamental truth: everything in a person's life is interconnected; it is a fluid operating system, interacting to create a harmonious balanced life. When there is disharmony in a person's system (i.e., unresolved personal issues, illness, money worries, dating, and endless life factors),

this imbalance creates disease within the body over time. It is a scientific principle that all systems within an organism work together for the good of the whole. Gentlemen, we are not any different!

Operating like a robot isn't sustainable long term; you can't live your life in your head. Being a cerebral guy isn't bad, but it can't be your only option to function emotionally and relationally. Your feelings matter; the deliberate or unconscious avoidance of them eventually leads to catastrophe, such as the loss of relationships with your children, poor health, isolation, divorce, rage, contempt toward your family or partner, and an overall unhappy life. Over the years, countless men have sat in my office who were extremely wealthy (i.e., billionaires) and professionally powerful but emotionally and psychologically bankrupt.

You can't work fourteen hours a day, drink only coffee or energy drinks, eat fast food, skip sleep, argue with the competition,

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***Imbalance will always "break" our system of living to get us back to being balanced!***

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and expect a good emotional outcome. Our lives are a composite of multiple factors, and these factors together produce a healthy life. Our bodies crave homeostasis: our natural state is health, balance, and smooth interactions. Western medicine acknowledges underlying psychological issues, unseen casualties of emotional upset, early life traumas, depression, and chronic anxiety and their collateral damage on the physical body.

*Yo, I need some fucking help! Those six words changed my life!*  
—John Wald, NBA All Star discussing how he dealt with physical injuries that affected his mental health

John Wald is a great example of a man who is rich, gifted, famous, and not invincible. Experiencing a possible career-ending knee injury and the enormous struggles that come with physical recovery is daunting. Most of us think that we are the only ones who struggle with physical and emotional issues. Regardless of their situation in life, men are more similar to each other than they are dissimilar. John Wald is an example of our commonality, not exclusivity. No man is beyond his body's needs and wants.

### **Question 3: How Am I Creating Physical and Emotional Balance in My Life?**

In sports, men readily accept that emotional loss impacts a team's performance in the next game or the next season. Why are we any different? We are not. Our physical well-being is directly impacted by our feelings, thoughts (critical or positive), choices, actions, life events, stress, losses, money worries, personal beliefs, and lifestyle. The point is that men of all ages have psychological feelings that connect to our physical well-being.

For instance, it is very difficult to get up Monday morning when your girlfriend ended your two-year relationship over the weekend via a text message. It is difficult to fall asleep even though you are physically exhausted, worrying about your rent payment due in three days, and currently unemployed.

These naturally occurring mind-body connections seem basic and obvious, yet they can cause profound health issues.

Men and change are not usually good friends until our nemesis, despair, shows up with a cancer diagnosis or a stroke (in my case). Despair is the driving force for men to become disciplined, motivated, and proactive about changing their lifestyle and mental health.

## WHAT ARE PSYCHOSOMATIC ILLNESSES? AM I THE PROBLEM?

You have a powerful mind-body connection, hence the concept of psychosomatic medicine. This field of medicine has been gaining popularity along with holistic medicine since the 1980s. The idea is that emotional experiences (good or bad) and their expression (the ability to describe and talk about them) play an invaluable role in a man's physical and psychological health. Likewise, suppression (conscious or unconscious) or avoidance of painful emotional topics (i.e., Roy avoids his rage about his father) or traumatic events past or present can be a major factor in a man's illnesses as much as a genetic predisposition to it.

These correlations are now widely accepted by the scientific community along with medical researchers. Psychologists have long known that emotional avoidance buries the painful feeling within the body. Eventually the issue re-surfaces at some point, usually during a personal crisis. Psychosomatic illnesses can be described as a mental health crisis that is negatively impacting your physical health.

### MIKE'S HEALTH ISSUES: MARIJUANA AND ANGER

Young men typically coast into their early or mid-twenties without many health problems or illness. For example, Mike, age twenty-five, believes that there is no psychological or physical connection between his angry outbursts, raging arguments with his family, heavy marijuana use, resentment toward his boss, and his chronic immunity issues.

In Mike's mind, he has "bad" DNA from his parents and his emotional volatility is a separate issue. Mike reports that he was full of energy prior to age eighteen with no health issues. He started smoking and vaping marijuana daily during his freshman year of college. Mike does not want to believe that his health issues could be impacted by his mental state of mind. Mike adamantly argues with me that his family issues and habitual drug use are independent of his current health challenges. I beg to differ with Mike. I reminded him that he has control and influence over his body and emotions. His response to that mind-body idea: "Doc, you are crazy. My issues aren't that bad; it's my awful parents who gave me bad genes." Mike is currently committed to his inner narrative that his parents are the problems in his life—not his heavy use of pot—contributing to his poor health.

Mike is committed to his position of blaming his parents and circumstances and unwilling to accept any responsibility. I mention to Mike that a classic side



effect of heavy marijuana use is THC-induced rage, mood swings, and emotional instability. Mike canceled all future appointments with me.

## DO I HAVE PSYCHOSOMATIC ISSUES?

The practice of medicine is an ongoing science with new discoveries each year. The medical model of science of the body to the exclusion of the whole person is no longer the prevailing practice in Western medicine. Doctors now consider a person's psychosocial and psychological factors as part of their overall health, treatment, history, and care. Consider the emotional, psychological, and personal components of the life events and issues listed below in relation to your long-term health. Some common psychological and psychosocial medical health issues that can impact your life include:

- Being laid off or terminated at work; unemployment—feeling despair, alone, dismissed, rejected
- Divorce process, child custody issues, coparenting, or loss of a meaningful relationship—feeling like “damaged goods”
- Marriage, blended family challenges, in-laws—hope, anxiety, changing life plans, relocation stress
- College graduation—sense of achievement, fear of the future, anxiety about a life plan or finding a job/career?
- Moving, either locally or across the country; roommate problems—avoiding change, feeling relieved
- Children leaving or returning from school—sadness, excitement
- Aging parents; living with your parents—fear of loss/death, acceptance
- Suffering a physical injury or chronic illness—depression, doom, dread of the unknown
- Death of a partner, close childhood friend, emotional support animal—grief, loss, hopelessness
- No close friends at work or in your private life—feelings of hopelessness, regret, despair (suicidal thoughts)
- Chronic worry/stress about money, career, and relationships—nothing feels secure or safe, mood swings due to despair
- Bankruptcy, foreclosure, or loss of retirement fund—feeling socially isolated, shame, regret about prior choices
- Having a baby—natural, adopted, or via surrogacy—feeling excitement, overwhelmed, sleep deprived, lacking a support network

These are some of the typical events and situations and related emotions that can be triggered in your everyday life. Change and disruption of your emotional (how you feel) and mental (how you think) balance is normal and not unique to you—it is common but rarely discussed among men. Again, the old masculine model that a strong man can express only anger and calmness in the face of fear isn't helpful or useful. Uncovering these unspoken beliefs within you about your own personal “gag order” is healing and life changing.

#### **Question 4—What Situation, Event, or Relationship Could Be Impacting My Health Currently?**

In the practice of psychology, it isn't the events that are a mental health concern. Rather, how we react to these events is a big determinate of our mental and physical well-being. Men typically live in their heads—emotionally disconnected from their life events.

For instance, when anxious or stressed about money, your body has a physical reaction to it. Anxiety, like all emotional reactions, has a physical component to which your brain and body respond. For example, you might suddenly feel your heart racing or experience stomach/indigestion issues when you attempt to manage your money concerns, dating expectations, friend circle, or professional colleagues. A hot topic for men is family relationships past and present. These critical emotional bonds are anything but neutral or avoidable for men.

#### **Question 5—Do I Accept the Fact That I Had or Am Having Emotionally and Mentally Challenging Events in My Life?**

The list of events mentioned are only some of the common stressors men face and generally dismiss as trivial. The point isn't to throw a pity party but rather to clearly understand how you manage the uncomfortable things in your life.

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***Our bodies and emotions never sleep—they are always on.***

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The problem with emotional denial, avoidance, and suppression of your feelings past or present is that they will break down your body. Severe mind-body traumatic situations can lead to serious health issues and, in some cases, death.

Our bodies aren't sleeping when we are—resting and healing, yes, but not sleeping. Our bodies are on the clock from the moment we joined this life and until the day we depart it. Our emotions,

thoughts, and feelings are energies that our psychological and physical bodies manage 24/7—prenatally to the present moment. The control center of your body is your brain, and the corporate headquarters is your frontal lobe (fore-head area), which is where your best life is lived, understood, and managed. Our brain reacts to our emotions with a variety of chemicals and physical movements. The superpower of your fight-or-flight adrenaline pump is discussed here and throughout the book. Many psychosomatic illnesses are based in the chronic fight/flight responses to your day-to-day life. *Your quality of living matters more than the quantity of living.* Think about that.

Although we know that dinosaurs are no longer chasing us, our internal response to a call from our boss can elicit the same biochemical reactions in our body—fear for our life (lose our job and our life is over). Long-term exposure to adrenaline (a stress hormone) breaks down and dysregulates the normal physiological functioning of our bodies—imbalance again. This pattern of overreacting to all concerns, whether significant or minor, can trigger binge eating, heavy alcohol drinking, recreational drug use, and sexual impulsivity.

### ROADBLOCKS TO YOUR HEALTH—YOU

We met Roy at the beginning of this chapter. Per his own self-analysis, Roy is a steroid-using, professionally driven, money motivated bodybuilder who hates authority, has not spoken to his father in more than three years, and, at times, is verbally aggressive toward his girlfriend. Roy woke up one morning with severe pain in his lower back area. The pain throbbed and burned. Roy went to the emergency room knowing something was terribly wrong with his body. He could barely walk.

After more than five hours in the ER, the doctor advised Roy that he had a severe liver infection, enlarged prostate, dangerously high blood pressure, and an irregular heartbeat. He asked Roy if he was using any type of steroid or growth hormones. Roy explained that he had been injecting himself twice a week with a steroid that he bought from his college buddy who works out at his gym.

Upon hearing of Roy's long-term use of steroids (more than five months), the doctor immediately hospitalized him for the next nine days. During that time, Roy had several MRIs to check for any tumors or blood clots in his body. Several blood clots were found in his legs.

Roy and I spoke on the phone while he was in the hospital, and I asked him who he had unfinished business with. Roy promised me that he would

call his father after we hung up and break the icy silence between them. Roy was scared that he might die and felt powerless to keep his body from shutting down.

Roy called his father. They spoke for a few minutes, and his father, who lives on the East Coast, said he was flying to Los Angeles immediately to see him. Roy's dad, Mark, arrived later that day, and they cried and hugged each other. Both men regretted allowing their differences to interfere with their relationship. This crisis got Roy to address his "rage" and resentment toward his father since childhood.

Roy admitted he knew that his steroid use, poor choices, and aggressive behaviors stemmed from his unresolved relationship with his father. Roy needed this medical crisis, which almost killed him, to force him to face his emotional past, which was hindering him from living his life. Roy was fortunate to survive his physical and emotional neglect. The power of our "rage" can be fatal if left unchecked; it caused Roy's hospitalization. Once our lives are abruptly stopped by our bodies' refusal to cooperate with our "wrong" choices, we find the courage to address what seemed impossible the day before.

Any degree of change requires us to make emotional and mental commitments to our overall quality of life, mental health, and balanced masculinity. I discuss with my clients the following questions and topics as a beginning point for creating a healthier mind-body connection:

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***Taking action is critical for any significant change in life—what's your next move?***

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- Your physical health is not in a vacuum. All the facets of your life are an ongoing interaction of variables. What emotions, thoughts, people, and circumstances in your past and present do you dismiss?
- What is your foundational "glue" that guides your life?
- What influence does your body have in your daily life?
- Your physical health can be an indicator of other issues in your life requiring your attention. What physical symptoms or physical aches and pains do you experience?
- Do you believe that your mental health spills into your physical health?
- There are no dividing lines among your body, mind, and emotions. All three parts of you interact 24/7 all the days of your life.
- Do you allow yourself to rest, pause, and stop emotionally moving during your workweek?

- What can you do to create more balance between your work life and time spent with your family, friends, and alone?
- Bodybuilding, running, skiing, rock climbing, and walking involves movement. What things do you do to connect with your body?
- Men account for the highest rate of preventable deaths according to the National Institute of Health. What behaviors, actions, or choices do you make that are dangerous?

