

Male Engagement Concepts

Each of the following concepts have been found to be useful in engaging males by use of non-threatening acknowledgment of (their) real experiencing. In other words, such concepts validate those often secret or inner-world aspects of male lives. Further, such have been found useful tools for individuals themselves to recognise and communicate sources of personal distress or 'hot spots' underlying relationship difficulties.

While such concepts are not lost on females (particularly working/career women), the meaning and utility have been found to encompass certain unique aspects of the male experience. Importantly, their value as metaphors, models, myths and touchstones for personal transitions is apparent. This is particularly so in all-male forums, where individuals feel sufficiently comfortable and safe to talk openly and honestly about themselves after they realise that their experiencing is more 'normal' than they previously thought.

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Action Distraction

While much of the male identity is anchored to and defined by action: ie the achievement of outcomes through activities; action can also develop into a way of not addressing real-life experiences. For example, the classic workaholic can be understood to be avoiding dealing with other problems in his life. While distracting oneself through action can be a positive coping mechanism at times, (for example, extreme anger), overuse of this particular sort of coping mechanism can result in a poorly developed and narrowed sense of self with negative impacts on key relationships.

Being Real

Being real simply refers to the honest declaration of present experiencing. Being real requires no pretending and particularly, self-acknowledgment of what is truly going on inside of oneself. Being real also requires the honest response to requests from those near to us when they sense that something is not quite right. Notably, being real, not only requires an ability to monitor our thinking, emotional and bodily states, but critically, the development of meaningful words (language) to communicate such to ourselves and others.

Boundary Riding

This concept captures the idea of not quite ever being in the centre or personally involved in something that is important; but rather, skirting around the edges of it. Boundary riders typically avoid situations that may cause them some degree of discomfort, however, over time, such activity denies them a range of real-life experiences and opportunities to grow and develop. Males (fathers) often report boundary riding around the emotional life of their family by defaulting such activity to their partners. Consequences of boundary-riding include marginalisation from much of family activity and not being emotionally available to children (or even partner).

Cavalry Waiting

Just as in the times of Cowboys and Indians, sometimes our heroes, typically under overwhelming odds, would circle their wagons, dig in and basically wait to be rescued by the cavalry. So too this concept captures the idea of men putting themselves into a siege response and basically waiting to be rescued. However, Cavalry Waiting represents a denial of self-responsibility, particularly in those circumstances where self-action is required. Cavalry Waiting is also at the basis of co-dependency in relationships where one partner simply waits for the other to make things better or even fix things up.

Cliff Dwelling

This term refers to a style of living that is close to danger or to falling off something threatening. Cliff Dwelling refers to a lifestyle which is not only full of risk, (given its proximity to a cliff), but also highlights that there doesn't exist very much of a "buffer zone", ie the capacity to move comfortably in one particular direction at least, without increasing personal danger. Those males who have little or no capacity to exercise control over strong emotions without acting-out or "losing it" are typical cliff

dwellers. For many males, the ‘cliff’ can be an imaginary fear rather than anything real, however, over time, has become just as scary or dangerous.

Continuing Stewardship

The concept of parental stewardship (as distinct from implications of ‘ownership’ of children) when applied to parenting has been found to have significant utility for both separated parents but particularly non-custodial fathers. Specifically, the notion of stewardship appears less threatening, more inclusive and fair to those fathers who feel disenfranchised from their children following separation.

Further, this concept /principle has been found to represent part of a critical enabling strategy to assist those who have become entrenched in current hostilities and past issues by shifting parental focus onto their children and to more positive future possibilities.

Doing the Best I Can

We mostly hear this statement when males are responding to challenges or criticisms to “do better”. Interestingly, such a statement often represents the truth; ie the person is at that time, actually coping to the best of his ability. However, sometimes this same statement can represent a defensive response to fear about a certain activity and under such circumstances (ie where the fear is not acknowledged), represents a level of dishonesty and pretending. When we are being real, such a statement can represent a true self-declaration. However, when we are pretending, it can also be a mask to or a denial of our fears to not want to attempt to do something else.

Emotional Inheritance

This concept has been found to have enormous face validity, especially to fathers who have come to consider themselves “disposable parents”, “walking wallets” or essentially “dispossessed” and/or “disinherited” from their children’s lives. *(Note: Such phrases and self-descriptions have been regularly used by such fathers in communicating their frustrations and fears).*

Emotional Inheritance is maintained to be a forward looking, hopeful, child-focussed and pro-social concept that foregrounds the importance for such fathers to strive to retain positive, nurturing and sustainable relationships with their children. Emotional Inheritance seeks to encapsulate all those positive qualities that a father would ordinarily wish to pass onto his children, quite independent of acquired marital resources. Those parents who subscribe to such a concept are also far more likely to provide financially for their children, irrespective of substantial changes within their own lives.

Father Hunger

One of the unfortunate legacies of contemporary Western society is for males to be raised in families that have distant, tired or absent fathers. Furthermore, the historical rites of passage and mentoring activities of so-called more primitive societies which acknowledge and empowered such transitions, are also clearly missing in modern communities. The end result is that many males in contemporary society experience the absence of a close (and real) relationship with their father or a dominant male. ‘Father Hunger’ is a concept that was coined by Steve Biddulph in his book,

Manhood. Biddulph maintains that this is a widespread phenomenon, which despite personal resolutions to do otherwise, many males repeat with their own children, especially their sons.

Father Time

Daniel Petre recently published a book called *Father Time*. Petre, a former Microsoft executive, documents his own growing awareness of the need to establish a work-life balance in his own activities so his children did not suffer from Father Hunger. The term Father Time refers to that unique opportunity for fathers to spend quality time with their children by shrugging off the role of the corporate executive and spending activities in the present with their children. Notably, Father Time cannot come from anyone other than the child's father, therefore, all the activities from the mother cannot reasonably displace the need for Father Time in a child's life.

Fence Leaning

Just as the concept of 'sitting on the fence' highlights a position of not taking sides, 'Fence Leaning' has a different sort of meaning, however, still defines a particular relationship to a boundary (or fence). Fence Leanners are those who are actually on one side of a boundary, however, are attempting to hold the fence in place, ie maintain some boundary which is clearly being challenged. Fence Leanners are actually using the boundary itself to prop themselves up, and therefore typically place themselves on the opposite side of the forces that challenge and typically do not declare their reasons for taking such a hidden posture.

Functional Pretending

This concept embodies a number of aspects of the male experience that relate to an avoidance of aspects of reality. When we functionally pretend, we may exhibit ambivalence about intimacy and experience limited safety zones, particularly in our emotional world. Further, functional pretending may encompass a suspended or delayed realisation of self-needs and nearly always the displacement of our stewardship over the now. Continual functional pretending typically results in males living in a low-grade, depressive world that may include sleep and energy disturbances.

Head Space and Heart Space

In essence, Head Space refers to the world of words, of rationalisations and of logic. Conversely, Heart Space refers to the world of present experiencing, including areas of our thinking and bodily functioning, but particularly emotionality. While both places have "real" aspects, the typical male world is that of Head Space. Avoiding Heart Space can therefore distort real experiences and opportunities for connecting with other persons in a more complete, honest or meaningful manner.

Keeping It Up

This concept quickly brings to mind sexual pressures for males; pressures that dig deep into male anxiety, particularly male performance anxiety and habits of people pleasing. So too, anxiety exists around maintaining those aspects of our lives which we know to be difficult to sustain long-term, particularly when based on pretending. Like so many other of these male engagement concepts, Keeping It Up can be a

functional mask that exists to deny what is being experienced in a very real and personal sense.

Living Behind Enemy Lines

This concept was coined by a group participant who came to the realisation that his typical response was “to go into my head to deal with pressures”. His recent awareness of the limitations and dangers of such activity, were described as “living behind enemy lines”. Just as in the case of war, this term highlights the dangers and lack of real support that accompanies such activities. By use of this metaphor, the concept allows a male to see that certain of his historical activities (eg over-utilisation of ‘Head Space’) represent high risk and may not support him long term.

Making Time Friendly

Male experiencing often encompasses an awareness of the ‘unfriendliness’ of time, which arises from an awareness that the present does not provide sufficient resources to meet current challenges. The typical response at such juncture, is to either delay the sustaining of real needs; ie a siege approach which simply waits in the hope that time will move the individual to a better place; or alternatively, commence activities that will distract the individual from the present. Notably, the net experience is an unfriendliness of time itself.

Mexican Stand-Offs

While Mexican Stand-Offs can be enacted by both males or females, the quality of the male Mexican Stand-Off is hallmarked by a commitment to avoidance of self-disclosure and an adamant stance based on the female rescuing him from a difficult emotional place. Females often report such male behaviours as ‘sulking’, while the male often experiences their position as justified. The end result is most often a no-win outcome and an entrenchment of relationship difficulties.

No Man’s Land

Another war time term referring to the piece of land between two enemy front lines and traditionally known for its dangers. This metaphor has applicability to the male experience of being caught between two (2) competing forces/worlds to such an extent as to be locked into a sterile and dangerous place. The common, no-man’s land for males is the place between work and home. The metaphor also has utility in that it can be taken literally as ‘No Man’s Land’ = **No** Man’s Land.

One Sized Boots

This metaphor relates to the common male perception that there are a very large pair of boots that each male must fit, invariably much bigger than what he could possibly fill. This perception often rises over time from a belief that the façade of pretending, that’s offered by other males, is actually real; ie that they are coping and achieving in a much more substantial way than himself. Further, the competitive posturing between males reduces the opportunities to dispel such myths in order to more realistically compare himself to other males. The concept has utility in that the one-sized boots in reality belong to each person; that is their **own** sized boots.

Prodigal Father

The title of a book by an American author, Bryant, who wrote extensively about his own experience of having to return into the life of his son. The term puts a twist on the Biblical Prodigal Son by sheeting home responsibility to fathers to be proactive in returning to reconnect with their son and/or children and to make amends wherever such is warranted. The term strikes a general chord with most older fathers who have become increasingly aware of their historical unavailability to their children, even in intact families and their consequent desires to connect more substantially.

Real Time

A piece of computer jargon which has definite applicability to the male time-travelling experience. Real Time is now time; that is, living in the now and therefore not related to living in the past nor projecting ahead into a possible future. Real Time appears to be the only time we can connect appropriately with our children and those closest to us. Even small children are aware if their fathers are operating in *real time* or alternatively *not totally present*. Real Time requires the honest acknowledgment of present experiencing to be effective.

Reconnecting with Myself

An extremely useful concept to males who have or are going through some crisis-related response wherein the traditional mechanism of working harder is simply not effective. Reconnecting with Myself is based on the experience that there is great utility for an individual in doing a very thorough self-audit at such times. That is, gaining insight through identifying of what forces have impacted on and shaped their character to date and consequently understanding themselves, their needs and their feelings in a much more useful fashion. Prior to reconnecting with themselves, most males in crisis seem better able to express what they don't want rather than what they really do want.

Some Day I'll...

Captures the typical internal male dialogue (self-talk) which rationalises delayed gratification. This is particularly relevant to the kind of self-talk which keeps males on the boundaries of important core family activity and therefore limited emotional availability to their children; ie "Some day (when I've got enough money in the bank and I'm more financially secure), I'll be available for my kids and my relationship and all the other good things that I'm now missing out on". "Someday I'll (Isle) does not exist in Real Time.

Stress Signature

This concept refers to one's unique set of physical, emotional and thinking cues that indicate stress build-up. The concept begs the importance of each male becoming increasingly aware of the more subtle initiatory-type cues, particularly bodily and emotional cues which flag rising stress levels. Awareness of one's stress signature affords more opportunities (and therefore choices) to enact earlier, more adaptive responses to early warning signs of stress.

Taking Inventory

Just as in the commercial world, there is an understanding and commitment to the traditional stocktake or inventory, this concept highlights the importance of the value to taking personal inventory of what past, present and future factors are impacting on a person's current functioning. Taking Inventory at this level is the hallmark of a responsible human being. The avoidance of taking inventory invariably places an individual at future risk and further entrenchment in pretending.

The Haunting

Another of Bryant's terminologies from *The Prodigal Father* and refers to the male experience of living with that cluster of negative guilt and fears related to past missed opportunities or inappropriate behaviours on their past. The concept engages many males who have great difficulty in disclosing their own levels of haunting, by acknowledging that such is normal and forms the critical first step in being able to address such. Haunting reflects those aspects of the past that seem alive in the present and negatively erode the capacity to enjoy Real Time.

Time-travelling

As the name suggests, Time-Travelling highlights the male capacity to avoid the present by either worrying the past to death or alternatively, shooting ahead in time to some possible (either positive or negative) future. Once again, what's important here is that the male gain some understanding of the value of standing still in time and taking care of the real stewardship; ie that is the now. While certain aspects of time-travelling are functional (ie visiting the past is critical to insight and examining possible futures, essential to planning), to do so at the expense of present functional is clearly dysfunctional.

Time Shifting

A well used and a useful therapeutic technique of having individuals change their individual locus of control; ie from the past or future to the present by having them move their time frame of responsibility to more appropriate point. Time Shifting can involve the incremental changes that are required to offload the past or to bring to stage manage bringing someone from the future into the present. For example, anxiety about the next week can be substantially reduced by focussing on controlling the next hour. Ultimately, a positive awareness of the value of living in the now brings relief from the capacity of the past to hold the present hostage or a person's capacity to give up the present to live in some possible future.

Tooling Up for Change

As the name suggests, in workplace projects, the initial phase is often to ensure that the correct tools are available for the job. Tooling Up for Change refers to that phase in significant life transitions where we look at the range of capacities and skills (and skill deficits) that may exist in our toolkit and therefore highlights those skills and resources (tools) that we may need to source from someone else. One sobering aspect of Tooling Up for Change, is the common realisation that our current support mechanisms are often inadequate to sustain real change.

Touchy Feely

Captures the male resistance to emotionality generally and specifically, the use of touching as part of appropriate human expression. Touchy Feely has become a more generalised term in male language to refer to weak, ineffectual, effeminate or superficial behaviours that appear threatening or even useless to the needs of a real male. Touchy Feely fears limit male expressing and ultimately, deny real needs.

Unconscious Roles

This term highlights the challenge for males to understand what aspects of their own behaviours (embodied in roles) have been taken on board in an unconscious or less than fully responsible or considered manner. The name suggests that several of the roles and therefore behaviours, attitudes and beliefs; have usually been adopted with minimal consideration for their fit with the individual's long-term needs and wants. Therefore, such may require significant review and readjustment when the mismatch has become apparent..

Valhalla

Of Norse or Viking origin and refers to the particular heaven where true warriors go to live in the next life. Both positive and negative aspects of this concept are apparent. Appropriate and necessary male bonding and support during times of war is understood to be functional for survival under such conditions. However, the focus on an elitist-style, warrior male to the exclusion of the more insightful, gentle and compassionate aspects of male experience is clearly problematic when the battle is over. The co-existence of the range of features (ie the warrior and the peacemaker) with wisdom to enact different roles appears most functional.

Work Woundedness

A term that has arisen in the last decade and refers to the entrenched outcome of significant work-life imbalance, ie the impact of attempting to engage and derive a disproportionate range of needs from the workplace. Clearly, many needs are more appropriately sought from a broader range of social experience. Work woundedness not only refers to personal deficits as a result of 'workaholic' activities, but also to the experience of coming face to face with disloyalties and/or economic realities of changing workplace and vocational arrangements in contemporary society.