

What brings men to counseling and what happens when they come?

It may happen in their 30s, 40s, 50s or later. Men who have dealt with everything life has handed them -- those whom Michael Rogers, Clinical Director at Samaritan Center, describes as "testosterone-driven fixers"-- find that their defenses are wearing thin. The pressures come at them from all sides. Frustration, depression and anxiety threaten to overwhelm them and their relationships. At the point when they can't outrun their fear, Michael said, it's often through someone close to them who sees or feels their distress -- a doctor, wife, employer, or friend -- that they come to counseling."

"I think men initially tend *not* to view therapy as their domain," said Steve Franks, one of 13 men who provide therapy at Samaritan Center. "They view it as the domain of women: a place where you talk about feelings, problems, relationships. It can be difficult for men to ask for help. They view it as a sign of weakness."

"In fact," said Rob Erickson, "it's generally the women in their lives who ask them (either lovingly or with some level of hostility) to come to counseling."

Jim Aultman said, "The American culture revels in the self-reliant, self-contained and unflappable male hero. These portrayals don't lend themselves to being in touch with real-life despair, vulnerability, or any deep reflection on one's emotional process."

This idea was voiced also by Douglas Johnson. "From my experience working with men in both individual and couple therapy, they often enter into the therapeutic relationship with some fear about having to give up some of themselves and/or be feminized in order to participate in the process. To their delight, they discover that they're invited to be more of themselves, to fully embody their maleness and masculinity and grow in appreciation for themselves and their qualities. In the process, they develop a self-awareness as well as a language that more accurately expresses this and are able to put themselves forward effectively in the world and in their relationships."

Ron Kirstein sees it primarily as a sociological construct. "Men get caught in a kind of 'Catch 22,'" he observes. "They're expected to be traditional, Mr. Fixit, emotionally steady and responsibility-oriented and, on the other hand, they're supposed to be Modern-Man, sensitive and caring, people-oriented. They get confused trying to do it all, and it results in exhaustion, anger and damaged relationships." Ron sees the benefit of therapy occurring when men are able to identify their true selves in the midst of all the "should dos" and "should-bes."

"I see a lot of men who come in because of work stress or transitions like retirement or divorce," Doug LeRoy said, and I find that they respond to a real, practical approach. They want results. They like homework." Doug, a social worker who is trained in transactional analysis (TA), has worked with men for more than 30 years, both at Samaritan Center and in his earlier work with the government"

When men can't fix it, whatever 'it' is, there's shame associated with that," Doug said. "And it's a lot harder to say 'I'm sad' or 'I'm afraid' than it is to be angry. But when men get hooked in and begin to grow and see results, their whole system gets better and they begin to trust themselves."

Gary Steeves noted that he eventually had to admit that he couldn't fix himself in the aftermath of an auto accident several years ago. Physical therapy and "dealing with it myself" was only helpful up to a point, he said. "It was as if I was carrying that traumatic experience around in my body. I was like a block of concrete." When he finally went to a movement therapist, he said it was transformative. "First of all, the roles were reversed. Someone was working with me—not 'fixing' me but, rather, helping me manage those forces within me. I think it is incredibly powerful when we face our limitations and our vulnerability. We can stop carrying this mantle of having to do everything by ourselves."

Mark Houglum, a pastoral counselor as well as a marriage and family therapist, said that he thinks it is "a huge step for men to seek help. They resist the notion that talking with someone who listens in a safe, affirming, empathic way could be helpful. I find that when they take that risk, they find a sense of greater ease with themselves—a generosity with themselves."

Michael Rogers notes that there are a number of men's groups in the area, including Teleios (see www.teleios.org) and a breakfast group that draws several hundred men at First Presbyterian Church of Bellevue. "I've been part of a small men's group for 16 years," Michael said, "and I have to tell you that we aren't nearly as good at self-disclosure as women are. It takes us a long time to get to an authentic level of sharing."

"Coming into therapy," said Bill Collins, "seems to give men 'a Walden Pond.' A reflective space where they can take stock of themselves and consider healing possibilities. In *The Way of Man*, Martin Buber notes that Yahweh asks Adam in the garden, 'Where are you, Adam?' not because Yahweh does not know the answer, but because Adam doesn't know the answer."

In 2005, 'The Men's Fund' was created by a donation of \$1,000 to help low-income men receive needed therapy. This donation, made by a Samaritan staff member who wished to remain anonymous, was matched by other staff contributions. Since then, other donors have joined with Samaritan staff in supporting this fund. You may contribute to 'The Men's Fund' and to Samaritan's other areas of service by using the enclosed donor envelope or contacting us directly