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Article 24

Isolated Men: Helping Men Make and Maintain Friendships

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Advances in technology over the past several decades have connected humans more than ever. Electronic mail, cellular phones, videoconferencing, Web-based social networks, and a host of other advances have saturated our lives with potential connection. In spite of the ease and ubiquity of tools for communication, many clients I meet with yearn for connection with others: None so much as the men who have been distracted from friendship by investments in work and family. The present treatise provides some background about masculine culture and describes some of the qualities of male same-sex-friendships. Suggestions are provided for counselors attempting to scaffold male clients who are looking to make friends.

Masculine Culture

The first step in contextualizing men's same-sex-friendships is to understand a little about the masculine culture in which men exist. Liu (2005) argued that men and masculinity are a unique cultural group and suggested that they be considered a multi-cultural competency for counselors. He observed that men experience similar difficulties due to common societal expectations, such as traditional male sex roles. These traditional male sex roles are socially prescribed stereotypes and norms to which men are expected to adhere (Kilmartin, 2000). These are stories that society tells about how men are supposed to be in the world, and which, if violated, the perpetrators will be shamed and prejudiced (Krugman, 1995; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010).

These traditional male sex role stories entail both positive and negative attributes, as outlined by Levant and Kopecky (1995). The negative qualities include avoiding the feminine, restricting emotions, disconnecting sex and intimacy, pursuing achievement and status, being independent, showing strength and aggression, and denying affection for men. The positive qualities are being willing to sacrifice for others, withstanding hardship and pain for others, solving other people's problems, expressing love through actions, remaining loyal, sticking with a difficult problem, and setting goals and taking risks to achieve them. These qualities are all evaluated based upon men's performances, thus requiring men to repeatedly display their masculinity (Edley & Wetherell, 1995). The performance of these traditional masculine sex roles helps to shape some of the qualities of men's same-sex-friendships.

Qualities of Male Same-Sex Friendships

The importance of friendships cannot be over emphasized for both men and women. These seemingly simple relationships can promote happiness, a sense of wellbeing, and can increase people's motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In terms of counseling men, friendships are important because a) they provide men social support during difficult times, b) they can reflect to men the consequences of avoiding intimacy, and c) they can provide men a safe context for working out relational issues (Gorden & Pasick, 1990). Many men may struggle with making or keeping friendships because some of the qualities espoused in traditional male sex roles can interfere with these relationships (Pasick, 1990). In particular, the qualities of being vulnerable, action orientated, work focused, and homophobic.

Friendships are their best when people can be fully themselves, often requiring people to be vulnerable with one another (Greif, 2009). Some men may feel uncomfortable sharing vulnerability with other men because it goes against traditional masculine sex roles (Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Pasick, 1990). The shame and prejudice of not adhering to those roles can keep men from getting closer with other men, even though many men desire that closeness (Goldburg, 1976; Greif, 2009; Kilmartin, 2000; Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Pasick, 1990; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994).

Male same-sex-friendships are often very action oriented in either shared activities or in doing things for each other (Greif, 2006; Kilmartin, 2000; Levant & Kopecky, 1995). The development of men's same-sex-friendships will often occur over a period of shared activity, such as at work or on a sports team (Levant & Kopecky, 1995). Sometimes these activities may be perpetuated long after both male parties have completed the activity in a desire to maintain the friendship (Kilmartin, 2000). This suggests that some men may not feel comfortable engaging in same-sex-friendships without a shared activity. Men usually talk during these shared activities, but the level of disclosure is usually less than their female counterparts (Claes, 1992; Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994).

As men age they tend to become increasingly focused on work, which can often create a sense of competition with other men (Levant & Kopecky, 1995). A focus on spending time at work or with family can take time away from connecting with friends (Kilmartin, 2000). According to Bergman (1995), males are socialized at a young age to relationally disconnect from others. He conjectured that this disconnection enables men to be successful at work because they can forgo relationships (i.e., family and friends) and turn potential friendships into competitors (i.e., co-workers).

Some men may be deterred from investing in male same-sex-friendships for fear of being seen as homosexual (Kilmartin, 2000; Nardi, 1992). Frank Pittman (Baker & Jencius, 2005) noted that men can interact in a whole host of physical ways, but if emotional intimacy is involved, they often disconnect for fear of being labeled homosexual. This fear of affection between men has been cited as a significant source of stress and stigma in men's lives (Pleck, 1981). Regardless, men value their relationships, often not noticing how important they are until they are gone.

Many men indicate that there is something important about male same-sex-friendships that are not replicated in cross-sex-friendships (Greif, 2006). Some findings have indicated that men who restrict their affectionate behavior with men tend to have an overall lower level of social support (Wester, Christianson, Vogel, & Wei, 2007). This

suggests that men who restrict their contact with men may not have sufficient social supports, thereby underscoring the importance of friendships. Whether these relationships show the same depth of emotional expression as women or not, men find great meaning and value in these friendships.

As men age they tend to have fewer salient friendships (Levinson, 1978). Pasick (1990) noted that many men in middle adulthood will identify their closest friends as being from their youth or as being their wives. They are frequently long out of touch with the former and do not reap the same connective benefits from the latter, some lamenting that they cannot make friends like they could while in school (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). A significant number of men believe that they do not have enough friendships and are uncertain how to make new ones (Greif, 2006; Knox, Vail-Smith, & Zusman, 2007). This is an area that counselors can assist male clients through scaffolding their search for new friendships.

Scaffolding Men Making Friends

Counselors are in a unique position to scaffold men as they reach out to others for friendships. When considering this process, counselors and clients need to openly consider several factors of engaging with potential friends. The first phase of working with men and friendships is to ensure a trusting and collaborative therapeutic relationship. This is important to help facilitate an open discourse, but also because the therapeutic relationship itself can provide an important model for of openness for men (Gorden & Pasick, 1990). After this foundation is set, counselors and clients can target potential friends, prepare for engagement, and then engage with potential friends.

The latter three phases are outlined in greater detail below. While suggestions are made for counselors and clients, these are not intended to be maxims for treatment. Rather, they can be applied to help shape the dialogue occurring in session between counselors and clients. I have found that when these considerations are brought into session they work as a catalyst for discussion and plan construction. Traditional male sex roles depict men as being oriented towards problem solving, therefore many men readily engage in this type of collaborative work in session.

Target Potential Friends

The discussion with male clients about engaging in making friends needs to begin by targeting potential friends. This can be conceptualized on two levels, the first being assessing the level of familiarity with people already in the man's life. The second is establishing what contexts might facilitate engagement with other potential friends. The level of familiarity and the comfort with different contexts will make engaging potential friends more or less easy. Through this discussion, men can begin to target those people who might become closer friends.

Familiarity. When targeting potential friends, a discussion needs to occur about who is already in the man's life that he might become friends with. This can begin by brainstorming with the client what people are currently in their lives that they may want to explore a deeper friendship with. Some men will be able to note people that they are already somewhat engaged with currently, but have not transitioned from acquaintance to friendship. Other men will not have any initial ideas and may require a more thorough

examination of their lives. These men may benefit from exploring different areas of the client's life, such as work, neighborhood, or social circle (e.g., gyms, clubs, religious groups, organizations, associations). These might yield potential friends that had not been previously considered.

The list of potential friends may be more or less familiar to the individual. The more familiar the prospect, the less difficulty there is in the approach and connection. If the client has had experiences with the potential friend (e.g., they worked on a project together), there may be a pre-existing understanding of shared interest or history. This creates a more comfortable situation in comparison to someone that the client has not interacted with but who he views as being a potential friend (e.g., someone who works in a different department). When choosing the first potential friend to engage, the level of familiarity with the person is an important factor to weigh. I have found that men who choose someone they are more familiar with have more success early on in making friends.

Context. Context can provide more potential friends as well as impact the client's comfort in engaging those individuals. For some men, the list of potential friends may be limited due to their limited interaction with others. This may require clients and counselors to brainstorm different contexts that provide opportunities to meet others. A different context could entail an intramural sports league, taking a class, or joining a club. The possibilities are boundless, but the choice that the client makes should reflect the client's interests. If he puts himself in a context that does not reflect his interests, he will most likely interact with people who do not share his interests.

The greater the client's comfort with the context, the greater his comfort will be in approaching potential friends. For example, a client's comfort level will be higher when interacting with someone in his office versus a new board he is serving on. In the former, he will be more certain with his surroundings, while the latter puts him in foreign environs. Therefore, a change in context can increase contact with potential friends, but it can also make it more uncomfortable to fully engage them. As a result, the client's comfort with the context of the interaction needs to be considered when preparing to engage a potential friend.

Once the list of potential friends has been established, the client and counselor can discuss the most desirable person to start with. This needs to entail considerations of familiarity and context, highlighting those individuals that are both familiar and exist in a context that maximizes the client's comfort. Once a potential friend has been targeted, the counselor can begin to assist the client in preparing to engage this individual.

Prepare for Engagement

Once you and your client have discussed the level of difficulty involved, clinical attention needs to focus on the preparation of the client. This phase largely focuses on ensuring that the client feels positively about himself as he engages another. In order to accomplish this goal, the client and counselor can challenge anxious thoughts, learn behavioral techniques, and construct supportive teams. From my experience, this process of preparation can bring with it opportunities to discuss ideas of friendship and masculinity. While the goal might be to make friends, there are gains that can be made by taking time to explore issues of masculinity in session (Brooks, 1998; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 2002; Silverberg, 1986; Solomon, 1982; Wexler, 2009).

Challenge anxious thoughts. Often times the most difficult activity for clients is to make the contact with the potential friend. This difficulty is often the product of anxiety about what might happen. Some clients will express concern that they are out of practice or that it is a skill that they have never had. Preparing cognitively helps bring to light any negative expectations that the client may have about approaching a potential friend. By highlighting these and challenging them in session, the client is better prepared to take the risk of engagement. In my experience, men's negative beliefs center on negative reactions from prospective friends, negative evaluation from observers, and issues related to self-efficacy.

Examples of common beliefs about negative reactions from prospective friends are, "He will think I'm weird," and "He will not want to be my friend." Common cognitions surrounding observer reaction include, "They will think I'm desperate," and "They will ridicule me." Furthermore, the client may negatively evaluate himself with statements like, "I'm an idiot," and "I don't have anything to offer anyone else." These types of expectations about what will occur need to be identified in session and challenged prior to implementing the plan.

Counselors can by proffering questions that catalyze the client's evaluation of these worries. Examples of these questions include (a) are there other possible and realistic perceptions on this? (b) what facts are there to support this worry? and (c) what has happened in the past to myself or others in similar situations? These types of questions will usually elicit more helpful and logical thoughts to replace the above worries.

Another potential intervention with these types of worries is to have the client role play the potential friend, a potential onlooker, or someone who has a different perspective (i.e., someone who is approaching a potential friend without worries). These types of role plays can provide the client with an alternative perspective by pulling them out of their own (Craske, 2010). Again, this type of experience will usually elicit more helpful and logical thoughts for the client to utilize.

Learn behavioral techniques. In response to the worry that can accompany approaching potential friends, I have found it helpful to teach some clients some behavioral tools. Counselors can help clients develop visualization skills and relaxation techniques that may help when they approach a potential friend. The former needs to be done prior to engagement with a potential friend, while the latter is typically utilized in the moment.

Prior to engaging a potential friend, counselors can have clients visualize a positive interaction with the other person. During the visualization, counselors may ask clients to describe the activity they are engaged in, the setting they are located in, and the particular behaviors they have performed (Farmer & Chapman, 2010). This type of rehearsal can help clients emotionally prepare for the task as well as emphasize the important aspects of the behavioral process.

Whatever relaxation techniques are used in this situation, they need to be flexible enough to help the client relax while also keeping him present. For that reason, I will typically utilize deep diaphragm breathing to assist in increasing relaxation. Deep breathing can be taught within one session, but takes a lot longer to apply effectively. I emphasize four aspects of breathing (a) diaphragm, (b) rate, (c) mindfulness, and (d) practice. I coach clients in bringing their breath into their diaphragm, ensuring that I

watch shoulders and stomach for movements. I encourage clients to allow their bodies to breathe at a "natural rate," which I define this as whatever their bodies feel is necessary. I ask them to be mindful of the act of breathing and to gradually slow the rate, if possible. Finally, I request that they practice the deep diaphragm breathing on a daily basis for a week. This will frequently entail an assignment of engaging in this type of breathing for five minutes each day for the week, which is sufficient for the present purposes.

Construct supportive teams. Social constructivist theory posits that people are polyvocal, which means that they engage in a discourse with internalized voices (Gergen, 1999). These voices can help to shape how individuals view themselves, others, and events. Therefore, it is imperative that clients be aware of the voices they are engaging with their internal discourses. Some of these voices may be antagonistic towards the client, while others may be supportive. It is important that the latter take the foreground when considering this endeavor, thereby constructing a supportive team.

When working with clients to build supportive teams, it can behoove counselors to start by exploring what voices exist for clients. Asking clients, "What would the important people in your life say about you making friends?" can catalyze a discussion about supportive and unsupportive voices. As those supportive voices are identified they can be added to a list that highlights the supportive team members that the client wants to dialogue with. Counselors can help to broaden the scope of clients' teams by including what important celebrities (e.g., musicians, actors, athletes) or religious figures (e.g., Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, Buddha) they might add to the team. This supportive team can be invoked prior to the client engaging a potential friend as well as in the moment when he might need extra support.

Spending time with preparation and not rushing the client through the process will help lay the foundation for success when he finally engages potential friends. Counselors need to allow clients to decide when they are ready to move forward in the process. When the client is sufficiently prepared, he will begin to make efforts to engage with potential friends. Considerations for that phase are outlined below.

Engage With Potential Friends

The final phase requires that clients utilize their preparation by engaging with potential friends. This entails clients making contact with potential friends and then maintaining that contact. Men tend to make friends over shared activities, therefore sharing activities and continuing to share activities is integral to the process of moving from potential friendship to actual friendship.

Make contact. Once potential friends are identified, clients need to approach these people. This is often the most difficult aspect of the process, largely because this requires that clients take action. When setting up goals, it can be helpful to ensure that the goals are broken into smaller steps, follow a logical sequence of steps, establish when they will occur, and create some reinforcement for attainment (Addis & Martell, 2004). Therefore, it can be helpful to break down the approach of a potential friend into several digestible steps. What follows are some of the steps that I have generated in my clinical work and are intended as suggested starting points.

First, clients need to establish when and where contact might occur. Clients should consider the comfort they have with the context, remembering that greater comfort eases the process. They must also consider the frequency with which this

opportunity might occur. If it is very irregular or infrequent, it might be best for them to consider other options.

Second, they need to consider an appropriate greeting. This may entail aspects of an activity that they are currently sharing with the potential friend. Otherwise, it might entail an introduction to an unfamiliar person and require some general personal information. This might include their name and something about their interests. The greeting can become the catalyst for a discussion, thus comprising the bulk of the interaction. If the greeting does not trigger conversation, the client might prepare a couple of questions that might help him facilitate that experience.

Finally, the transferral of contact information needs to occur. Some men may think that getting a potential friend's contact information is sufficient and afterwards discontinue the interaction. Counselors need to encourage clients to view this as a success, but only part of the overall contact. When contact information is exchanged, there is an opportunity to discuss the potential for future activities or interactions. Building a bridge between the conversation and potential activities is important because many men's friendships are based on activities.

Maintain connection. Contact is not enough for a client to go from a potential friend to an actual friend. Instead, they need to have repeated shared experiences over time. This requires that clients make contact with the person again in order to facilitate a friendship. Men's friendships tend to be based on repeated interaction and exposure. Therefore creating more interaction facilitates friendship. Clients need to keep that in mind and make additional contacts with potential friends after they have been first engaged. This contact may be a conversation or an invite to share an activity.

Based upon some of the reasons that men begin to lose friendships, it is important that men create space for these relationships. Some men may think that their new friends are established and they no longer need to work at the friendship. This is erroneous, as they need to commit to creating room in their lives for friendships. This might be most evident with work, where men might need to leave a little earlier than usual. It also might require them to take less work home with them at the end of the day. This shift away from work may be especially hard for some men, requiring a shift in priorities. It also may require that they spend a little less time at home, which may require some understanding on the part of partners.

It is important that men keep and honor the friendships that can develop from this process. By altering their life in order to make room for friends, many men may also find a greater sense of connection, tradition, and balance. No longer are they invested solely in one area, but rather their dedication can find another recipient in friendship.

Cautions for Counselors

Counselors need to exercise particular caution when assisting men in this endeavor. Just as there are instances that men might mistake a counselor of having sexual interest (Scher, 2005; Wexler, 2009), so too might men interpret the counseling relationship as friendship. Male counselors, in particular, need to be vigilant. For some men, the counseling relationship may be the first time some men have felt accepted by another man. They may misinterpret that openness and trust as being friendship.

Early in the counseling process, counselors can provide information to avoid this type of misunderstanding. Counselors can directly address the issue of being friends with the client and place boundaries on the relationship. Counselor can explain that while they may feel friendliness towards each other, the nature of their relationship restricts it to the counseling room. If a misunderstanding does occur, the counselor can use it as an opportunity to increase the client's insight. By exploring what is important or helpful about the counseling relationship, the client may get a better idea of what he is looking for in a friendship.

Summary

Many men find engaging in same-sex friendships very rewarding, yet struggle to make or maintain friendships over the course of their lives. When counselors address the problem directly in session, they validate the importance of having these types of connections. Otherwise, some men may believe that it is not an important issue or may worry that they will appear to be less manly because they want friends.

Counselors need to understand how masculine culture can frame men's experiences of friendships. These stories perpetuated in traditional male sex roles ask men to be invulnerable, action oriented, work focused, and disconnected from men. As such, many men will find that they lose friendships over time and feel increasingly isolated. Counselors can assist men in seeing the importance of friendships and scaffold their attempts to create these connections.

Male and female same sex friendships are different in the degree to which emotional expression is acceptable (Claes, 1992). While I do encourage men to become more open within the context of their friendships, I do not believe that females have superior friendships. Each individual will find the types of friendships that are most salient to him or her; it is not my place to pass judgment on the quality of those connections. Therefore, in closing, I encourage counselors to support men as they pursue whatever form of friendship that they find most meaningful and necessary at that point in their lives.

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