

ALL MEN

MALE VOICES TELLING THEIR STORIES TO MAKE A CHANGE

05 Your relationship with emotions

Excerpts from testimonies are heard.

Man 1:

I wanted to tell him, "I love you," but something inside me stopped me.

Man 2:

I think I've only learned to cry in the last few years.

Man 3:

Outside, you put on a brave face, you say 'I'm fine', then you go home and break down. Alone.

Musical interlude

Irene:

Welcome to all men. And also welcome to all the other people listening.

From the little spoilers you heard in the intro, I think you've already guessed that this will be a dense episode, because it will deal with a central theme for the purpose of this podcast. But before I introduce it to you, I'll let you hear some of the answers you left last time, when I asked what your initial difficulties were in approaching these issues:

Testimony 1:

Interesting. Contradictory. I'm still listening to the podcasts. In some cases, I noticed something I had already heard; in others, I reflected and realized that I had settled into conventions without thinking about them, which then led to discrimination.

Testimony 2:

I didn't want medals or special recognition, I just wanted to be considered part of the group, someone to count on. Instead, no matter what I did, I was always "the enemy."

Testimony 3:

Approaching these issues was not difficult, I had the support of my sister who wisely guided me. The difficulties came when I started applying what I read in books or heard in podcasts, ending up losing 90% of my male friends. My approach to feminism resulted in great loneliness, but today more than ever I believe it was worth it.

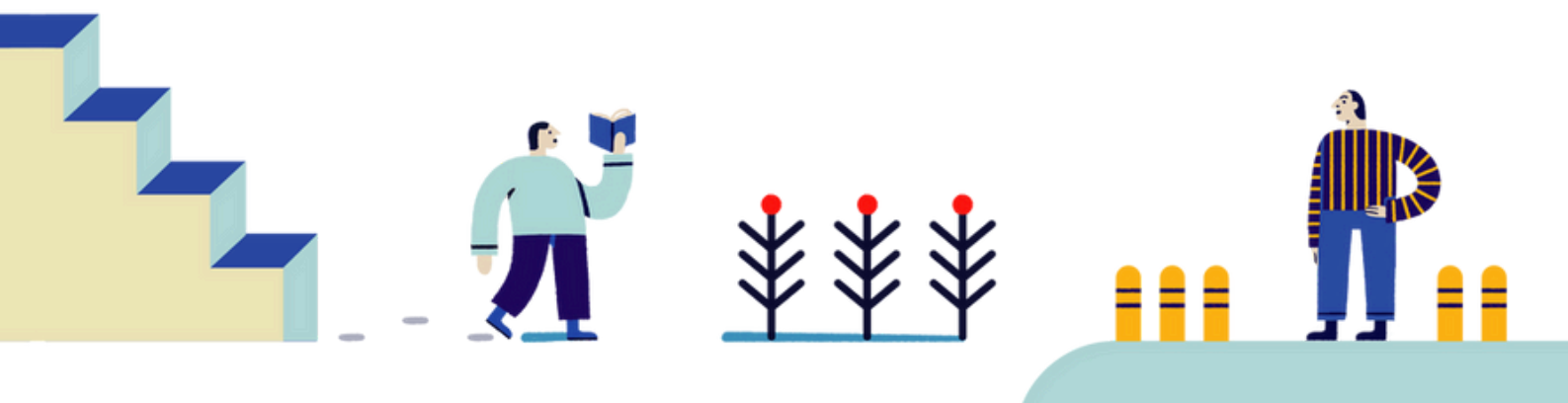
Irene:

This is "All Men - Male voices telling their stories to make a change", a podcast that starts with the belief that the role of the male in eliminating gender-based violence is central, but that does not mean it is simple. And so men will be the ones to talk about it, because if the problem is systemic, the solution has to be collective.

With today's question, we officially close the first part of the interview, which was dedicated to the relationship with oneself. From next time, we will listen to these men reflect on their relationship with other men. I know that these episodes have already been rich in content, but trust me, you haven't heard anything yet...

As I always want to take care of my listeners, I would like to give you a heads-up: one of the testimonials will talk about grief during Covid. Since this is a situation that has sadly affected many people, I am letting you know in advance, so that you are not caught off guard, in case this is a sensitive issue for you.

Today's question goes something like this: what is your relationship with emotions and expressing them?



Man 1:

My relationship with emotions is a very long one, because I have always had a very close, vivid, and conscious relationship with my emotions. That's why I've tried to manage them, and being a boy, I've also tried not to show them too much. Some, like anger, are less controllable for me, so my voice rises and other typical manifestations occur... well, I don't know if they're typical, but they show that there is an emotional movement.

Others, on the other hand, I have learned to control more, because I have always been very tearful, ever since I was a child, but the possibility of showing this in public, even if the public is represented by just one other person, always happens later. It's one of those things I probably learned early on: as a boy, you're not supposed to show that kind of emotion.

Anger, on the other hand, is more accepted. It depends on how it's expressed, of course, but if it's expressed verbally, with a slightly higher tone of voice, redness in the face, etc., etc... Whereas for a girl, it might be different; girls who get angry are considered hysterical... But a boy who gets angry, in short, is a boy who cares about what he is doing, who cares about that thing and is committed, determined, putting in effort, which also has very positive implications.

So the relationship with emotions is very close, very familiar. Alas, this relationship is mainly unexplored except individually: in writing, in my own mind, in my relationship with very few people, all female of course. But even with my dearest friends whom I still love after 50 years, it never happened except in late life that we allowed ourselves to cry together, and even then it happened when we were faced with an event: the mother of some of my friends had died, that sort of thing, in short.

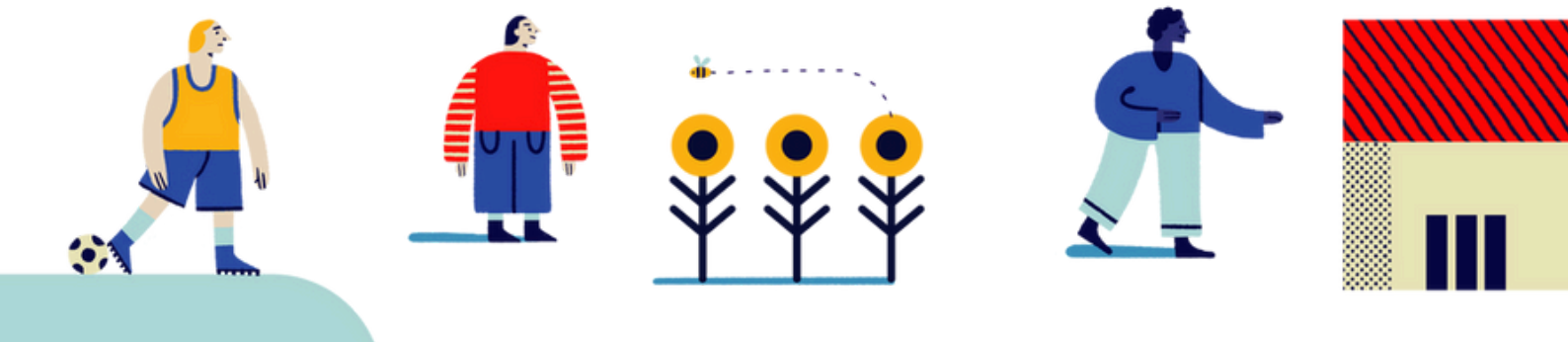
But back then, back then no, back then never. For me, crying was reserved for nighttime, with all the lights off, me in my bed, and at that point, I could deal with my discomfort

Man 2:

From this point of view, I have always been very unconventional; I have always behaved in a somewhat "girly" manner. I am a person who has always expressed anger when I felt it, sadness when I felt it, and pain when I felt it.

From that point of view, I have never had any problems expressing what I felt inside. The only problem I had was with anger, because in some ways anger was a kind of emotional validation of who I was as a person.

It confirmed the fact that I could somehow assert myself as a male within that group. More than anger, I would say aggressiveness. But aggression also stems a little from underlying anger, so in reality it's a combination of both.



But then at home, when I was alone, I would watch movies by myself and cry by myself, and I did so in total freedom. I think the set of emotions I was always allowed to feel did not correspond to what I actually wanted to express. In many social contexts, the fear of being devalued as a boy prevented me from being too emotional in front of others.

Man 3:

Well, that's an interesting question. Lately, in recent years, I've been thinking about this stuff a bit. I used to think I was dealing better with that. I don't know if I've gotten worse or if I've been fooling myself in other periods of my life when I thought I had such a welcoming relationship with emotions and the expression of emotions. As if thinking that emotions are to be lived fully and expressed fully, automatically led me to do so.

Then you analyze how many times you've cried in recent years and say, "Oh, damn, I thought I cried a lot more." I mean, if someone asks me what I think about tears, about crying in public or crying in general, I say, "Well, yes, I always do, of course". The truth is that I don't.

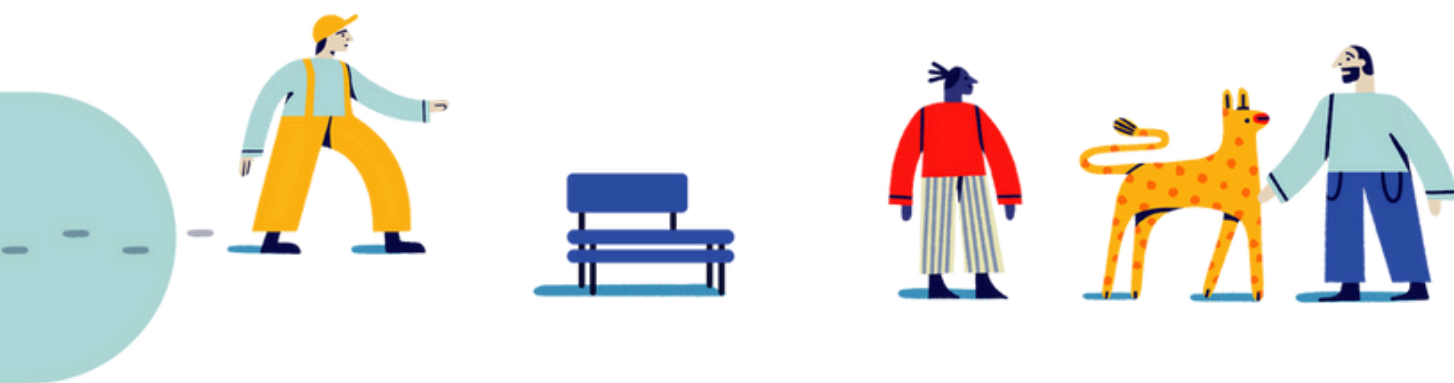
Man 4:

A very intense, troubled relationship. I've never been particularly good at repressing them, especially during my early teens. Then, well, life happened and I definitely closed myself off a bit more. After several therapeutic paths and also thanks to my work (I deal with communication, art, and entertainment), all this became a sort of catharsis, and so I was able, through the teachings of my profession, to learn how to communicate emotions effectively.

Man 5:

Fortunately, I think I have a good relationship with emotions in general, even though for a good part of my life I had difficulty with anger.

In the sense that as a female, having been raised as a female, grown up as a female, obviously anger was not really in the range of feelings that I could use, that I could express, except that I was very angry. Being discriminated against as a lesbian woman always made me deeply angry, and perhaps what also made me angry for a long time was the fact that somewhere in my subconscious I wanted to be a man, but I couldn't be one because I despised a certain type of masculinity, I didn't want anything to do with it.



Yet, perhaps, deep down I wanted it, seeing who I am now. So anger was a very present emotion, but one that I never let out, that I didn't verbalize, that I didn't express, and that I was always very afraid of because, as a person, I don't like to lose control, and the risk of anger sending you off course is obviously very high.

Man 6:

Before having children, I didn't realize it was complicated, but it was complicated. In the sense that before having children, I thought I was some kind of saint, to tell the truth, a kind of guru who feels no emotions, detached from the world, "I don't give a damn." And then, with children, something incredible happened: I started crying about everything, crying with joy or even despair if they hurt themselves. I started experiencing very strong emotions and feeling entitled to experience them. Because that's the big issue.

Having children has been this kind of experience for me, and it doesn't mean that it has to be that way for everyone, that's not the point. But as far as I'm concerned, I used to think I had a good connection with my emotions, but I didn't have a relationship with my emotions, or at least I didn't get to the bottom of them. I had a relationship with a superficial part of emotions. But then there was a deeper side to it, which I learned to experience, and even here it's not all sunshine and rainbows, in the sense that having explored this relationship with emotions led me to be much more emotional, it led me to be much sadder when something bad happens, and much happier when something good happens, to put it simply. It means living a much more intense life, but also a much more tiring one. Expressing emotion is something else again, because expressing emotions is not just about experiencing them within yourself, but experiencing them between yourself and the world.

And I'm happy to show my emotions in public. I'm not ashamed of it at all. There's a wonderful phase that kicks in shortly after you become aware of your emotions which, at least for me and for certain types of people I've seen, makes you want to show them off. That is, you want to show off that you are a man that cries, you think, "Wow, how cool, look, I'm a man and I cry, they're kissing, (in a movie, TN) I'm crying." And then at a certain point, you realize that also that phase is nothing but endearing (in a childish way, TN). But it's a necessary phase, in my opinion, or at least one that shouldn't be judged. And then at a certain point you realize that you can actually enjoy crying without having to tell anyone, without having to flaunt it or say 'look how much I've improved compared to the past'. You just cry, you just enjoy it.

And if someone judges you, they judge you, there's nothing you can do about it. It's clear that you constantly feel the stigma when you're a man who brings out certain things, for better or for worse. When you're a man who simply has a healthy relationship with himself, who strives to have one. But again, I wouldn't change this situation in which I sometimes find myself in the abyss because something bad has happened to me, compared to before, when something bad happened to me, and it didn't move me. I'd rather move emotionally and risk getting hurt than stay still and not learn.



Man 7:

Wonderful! I'm certainly not afraid to cry; in fact, I often do so in public. I'm not ashamed of my emotions at all. On the contrary, I think that nowadays they are the only real spice of life. Live them to the fullest, that is, to the end. Why deny yourself? They exist. They are so beautiful. But also the ugly ones, that is, even the ugly feelings. It's like putting a noose around your neck. Why? Why commit suicide?

They exist, take them all, but all of them to the end. I am lucky to be surrounded by people who are very similar to me in this respect, so perhaps it is even easier. But yes, if I feel moved, I get emotional, even in front of 200 people. But of course, I'm not ashamed at all. In fact, the only thing I tend to hold back a little is anger. I've never reacted violently in any situation, so I have an uglier, much uglier kind of anger, because if you get pissed off, you break something, it's easy, you get it out that way, right? Instead, I have a more sneaky kind of anger, since I always keep it inside.

Man 8:

In addition to obvious gender conditioning, a very difficult family history made me grow up extremely closed off and introverted. It took me along time to realize how much it was hurting me not being able to express certain emotions and feelings, especially in personal, relational, and emotional relationships, which continued to fail because at a certain point, the people around me were faced with my coldness, my impermeability, which obviously could not be accepted by the other party because it gave the impression of a person who was uninterested, uninvolved, and absent.

I realized about these problems in myself rather late; it took a few years of therapy to understand what needed to be addressed, what needed to be dealt with, what needed to be faced. And anyway, it's not like you acquire a certain skill once and for all; you have to train it too.

I have to remember that I have to let go of the reins, that I have to let certain emotions flow out of me, that I have to learn to listen to them. Channeling anger is something you have to learn to do if you've never done it before, because otherwise you hold it inside and it hurts you badly. Also channeling positive emotions, giving feedback to the people around you, showing them that you are there, that you are present.

Man 9:

It changes over time, in the sense that now it's good, but in my opinion it used to be terrible. Before, I couldn't even process them, let alone express them. Therapy helps, it helps a lot, and now I think it's pretty good.



There's always room for improvement, but I think I'm on the right track and able to express my emotions fairly well without any unnecessary consequences.

Man 10:

Terrible. Although I consider myself to be progressive on certain issues and topics, I can say that, unfortunately, for a long time, I grew up with a certain emotional repression, but I also repressed feelings of affection. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. A week ago, my little brother called me. He called me just to see how I was doing. Since I'm not used to receiving phone calls from people who just want to know how I am, I was almost moved, then he said, "Okay, Tommy, I'll hang up now so I can call my other brother."

And I thought, 'My goodness, how sweet!' First of all, I envy his ability to express affection like that and to keep in touch. I mean, when it's someone's birthday in the family, he creates those videos on TikTok with music, those pre-made videos, and sends them to the family chat. It's always very cute. When the call ended and I hung up, I thought I wanted to tell him "I love you", but something inside me stopped me, and as the conversation was about to end, I said, "Yeah, okay, bye." I didn't say I love you! And I realized that the fact that I can't say "brother, I love you" is clearly part of a system.

Of course I love him, he's my brother! But since he's also in that teenage phase where he's a bit gangsta, a bit tough, I was afraid he'd say something like "stop there" so I didn't say it, but on the other hand, I think a woman can say it more easily. That's what I think, but I could be wrong.

Man 11:

This has always been a difficult topic, because I have always been extremely emotional but extremely closed off, which is why I tended to explode with anger instead of stopping and saying to myself, "OK, I'm angry." Because I struggle, I struggle to come to terms with the fact that I'm frustrated, that I'm angry. Over the years, I had always shielded myself, basically, simply by lying. Like: "no, I don't feel that way, I'm okay", outside you put on a brave face, you say "i'm fine" and then you go home and break down. Alone.

Instead, I have now learned, over the years, to express myself, to open up. Especially if I find someone who is genuinely interested in knowing how I am, I can now finally open up.

It's hard to find people like that. They're hard to come by, but when I do find them, now I've finally learned to open up, whereas before I bottled it up, bottled it up, and in the long run, you feel the effects.



Man 12:

I'm laughing because in reality I am a hypersensitive person. Inside. Expressing it is a little more complicated for me. Here we have to go back to my school days, to the period in which I was getting excited about little things, and the so-judged thing of being too good, even if in reality you can't be too good, you're just good. That thing has always prevented me from achieving certain things, not just with girls, but also with my parents, because I was always the one who cried, who was too emotional, and so on.

They would say to me, "Can't you see that guy? Don't you see that other one?". And so that made me think, "OK, you know what? From today, I'm closing myself off, I'm not showing any emotion because I don't want other people to judge me."

This also came from the color of my skin and the fact that I was teased for that. This thing happened inside me, I'll try to express it, but I don't know if I can make it clear.

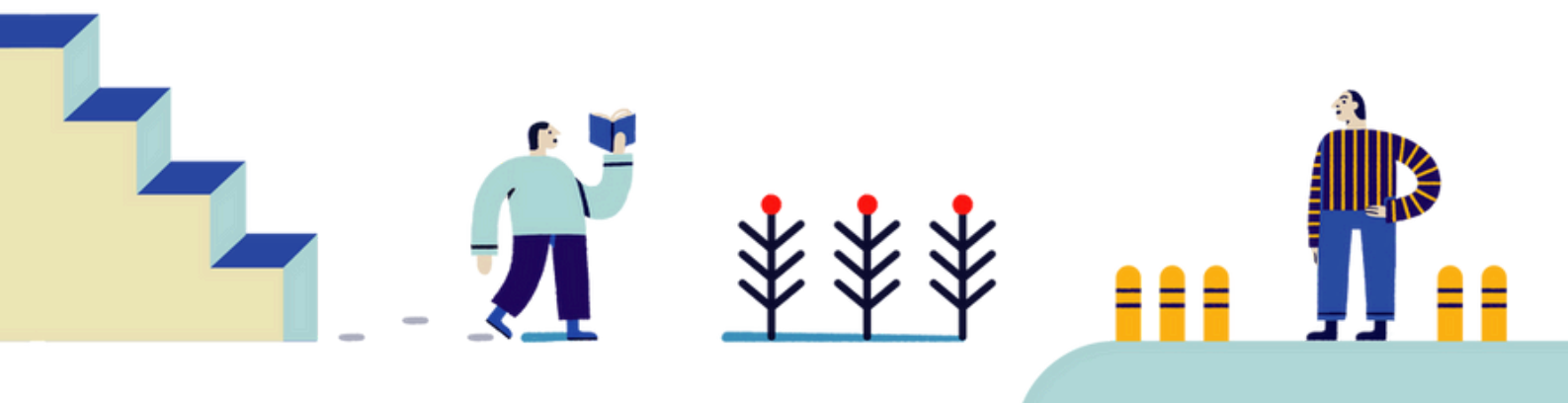
When I was teased, it clearly became very difficult for me to enter rooms where there were several people inside, because as soon as I entered, I thought everyone would look at me, judge me, and say something. So you know what I started to do? I started going into rooms, but closing myself off completely.

That is, I didn't show any kind of emotion, I didn't laugh or joke around, I stayed alone on the sidelines because I didn't want to interact with people at all.

Of course, I should also mention the relationships I had, where I might have opened up a lot, but then when pain was involved, it created barriers. There are certain things you do, maybe without even meaning to, like putting up walls and barriers, and then they stay there and you don't know how to break them down.

Man 13:

It's very complicated. I tend to be a very rational person at times, but at the same time I'm very emotional when faced with certain situations. It's always been difficult for me to manage my emotions. On the other hand, however, I've always tried to keep them inside a little. Knowing that I'm very emotional, I've always tried to limit their external expression as much as possible. I think I've only learned to cry in recent years. There have been a number of circumstances in my life, some happy, some less so. My grandparents died during the first week of Covid. It was the time when we were in lockdown, we were shut inside, and you know that, even if it's a person with whom you had a relationship of 35 years and whom you have always been close to, you will never see them again, you cannot say goodbye to them and neither visit them. I couldn't see them for months, I visited their grave after a few months.



That was a very difficult moment, and I think that being shut up at home and being able to keep my emotions to myself, without having to show them to anyone else, helped me to bring them out. I think that was also the moment when I broke down my walls. Because, for example, the day I saw my adopted son for the first time, when the nurse came in with the crib while we were washing our hands in the hospital to meet him, and I saw this transparent crib with this little head of black hair inside... I burst into tears. Because it was too big an emotion to keep inside, I didn't care that there were other people around, I needed to express this emotion and live that moment to the fullest.

Man 14:

It's a complex relationship that stems partly from how emotions have always been expressed in my family. The more I grow up, the more I realize that I am—not only, but also very much—my father's son, my mother's son. My father, in particular, is a person who never talks. Never. My brother and I jokingly say that he speaks with his eyes, that he gives us an answer about something with a glance. And even though my mother is a woman who talks a lot, we don't talk much in the family. And this is something that I have also carried with me in relation to my homosexuality, which I have experienced in the past with quite an amount of difficulty.

For some time, for several months of my adolescence, I went through a very dark period related to this, to non-acceptance. It was a very dark period that I went through, or that I thought I was going through, by walling myself off, creating a wall between what I felt inside and everything outside. I had to work hard on this too, and the work is probably not over yet. And unfortunately, the people closest to me in my life, including my partner, pay the price, because on a scale of emotions from 1 to 10, if I am below 3 or above 7, I freeze, and I immediately bring up that wall that I have learned to build in my family and that also comes from my experiences with my sexual orientation and gender identity.

As an adult, I hope to be able to work on this wall a little bit so that I can get in touch with these emotions a little more and express them.

Man 15:

Even now, I am still learning to get close to my emotions, in the sense that I was not taught to recognize my emotions or to ground myself, so for a long time I was at the mercy of my emotions. I think I am quite an emotional person, so there are situations where I feel outraged or angry, or I feel like crying because of injustice.

In the past, I tried to suppress these emotions, or rather, anger, for example, was an emotion that was already more socially acceptable.



Because if you get angry and shout or get indignant outraged, it has value in certain contexts. So it's okay to get angry, but it is a little less ok to cry
I'm still working on grounding my emotions, understanding why they arise, what the signal is, and behaving accordingly. I don't think I'm fully in touch with all my emotions. But in recent years, I've worked hard to try to reconnect with them.

Man 16:

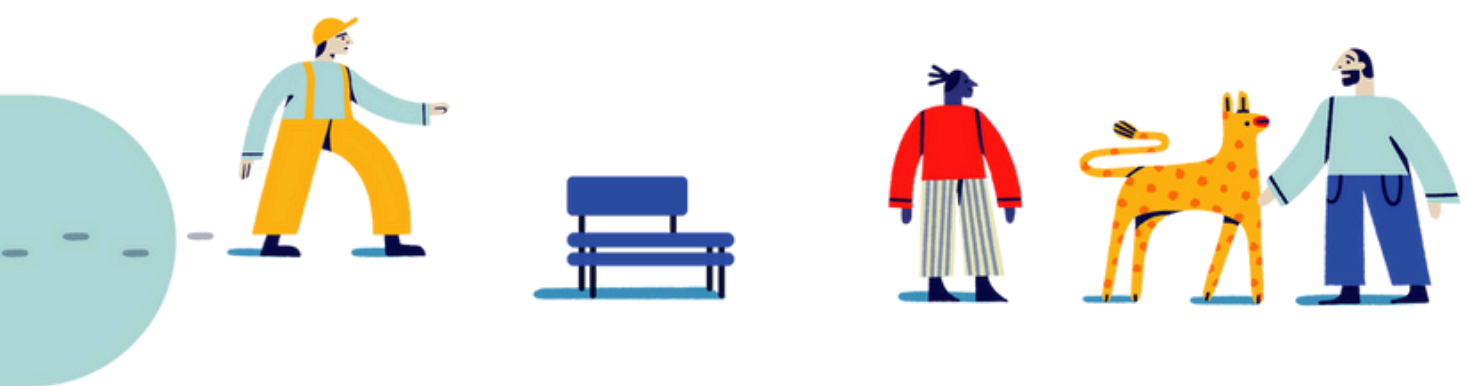
It's an evolving relationship. In my family model of reference, I don't think there has ever been much expression of emotions. It's a family model where emotions are rarely discussed, where conflicts are minimized, and therefore everything is very foggy. For this reason, I think I wasn't very used to talking about emotions, and there I realized, and even before that it was pointed out to me, that in my relationships with women even though I found it difficult to talk about my emotions, they still emerged in some way, so I sometimes tended to have a somewhat passive-aggressive approach. So what I have been doing a lot in recent years, including with psychotherapy, is trying to learn to name my emotions, to talk about them right away, and also in relationships with the opposite sex, to clarify the emotions that I'm feeling. But here's the thing: it's an effort I've been making well into my 30s, approaching 40, after at least 30 years of a difficult relationship with expressing emotions.

Man 17:

I think it's pretty healthy. Clearly, I'm not a psychologist, and someone else might say the opposite. Both my parents always taught me to express my emotions, that there is no such thing as a wrong emotion, so I've never had too much trouble expressing my emotions, even if some of them might fall within the cliché of femininity, and therefore be discouraged for males. Fortunately, I have to say that this is not an issue I have faced.

Irene:

And here I'll make a brief digression—I know, you weren't expecting it, but I like to surprise you—to tell you what happened at this point in the interview. Having heard about this man's positive experience, I told him I was happy for him, because after conducting several interviews, I could say with certainty that his experience was much more the exception than the rule. There were a lot more men who talked about why they found it difficult to talk about their emotions, some found it so difficult that the only answer was “very difficult.” At that point, the man I was interviewing added this important piece:



Man 17:

That's true, but I gave you an answer that applies to the last 10/15 years. It's much more difficult to go back in time and understand now, at 35, how certain situations made me feel back then.

Paradoxically, if I had written them down in a diary, as was often recommended to women, I would now have a greater awareness of my development. However, I never did this because it was women who wrote diaries. One of my biggest regrets is not having kept diaries of my life. I don't know, maybe it was partly due to my lack of inclination to write and all that—not that I didn't mull over the emotions I was feeling—but I think the cultural aspect of society had something to do with it: "What are you doing? Writing your emotions in a diary like girls do? The secret diary?" So I think that had an influence, yes.

Musical break

Irene:

Let's start right here.

While editing this episode, I asked this man if he could tell me what had happened at that moment, why he had made that addition. He replied with a voice note, which—with his consent—I will play for you:

Man 1:

There is definitely a point in my adolescence when I remember talking about emotions with my parents more clearly, but looking back, it's like layers of granite that I'm digging through in therapy. I have memories, but I'm still analyzing the emotional memories a bit. Sometimes they come up and you realize that a memory is different, and then it unlocks a whole series of moments you've experienced. Other times, you only have this vague memory, so there's no part of what I felt at that moment, and I think that's what it was. You set off a more accurate memory of my memories.

Irene:

There's a term we've heard a few times in this episode:



You have to constantly prove that you deserve this status. And if you fail, you are rarely given a second chance. This is also because you're the first one that doesn't know how to grant yourself another chance. In addition, failing in your own eyes and in the eyes of others makes you feel sad. But you don't know how to express sadness because you have only been taught to hide it.

It all starts in childhood.

When we see a child crying and say, "Don't cry, don't be a sissy" what else are we saying?

First of all, we associate crying with something feminine. This is no surprise since we stereotypically associate everything that seems to be a sign of weakness with femininity (and we could spend hours discussing why crying is considered a sign of weakness, but maybe another time), and since we don't think highly of weakness (or we wouldn't call it weakness), it goes without saying that we don't think highly of femininity.

So you, child (male child, TN), stay away from it. You were lucky enough to be born male, so behave like one.

Crying is the manifestation of one or more emotions. I may cry because I am scared, sad, or angry. If I tell a child (male child, TN) not to cry, do you know what happens? The human brain works like this: if I cannot cry to release the emotion I am feeling, I might as well not feel that emotion at all. Except that the emotions we silence don't disappear. They remain inside us and sooner or later, functionally or more often dysfunctionally, will find a way out. At that point, what channel will they choose to manifest themselves? In all likelihood, the one that exists and has been reinforced over the years. If I tell a child that he must be strong, brave, big and tough, and that he must assert himself, I am raising an adult (a male adult, TN) who will have few other ways of expressing their his emotions than through strength and all its synonyms.

Man 1:

The only problem I had was with anger

Man 2:

Some emotions, like anger, are less controllable for me.

Man 3:

I had difficulty with anger.



Man 4:

Channeling anger is something you have to learn to do if you've never done it before

Man 5:

I tended to explode with anger instead of stopping and saying to myself, "OK, I'm angry."

Man 6:

Anger, for example, was an emotion that was already more socially acceptable.

Man 7:

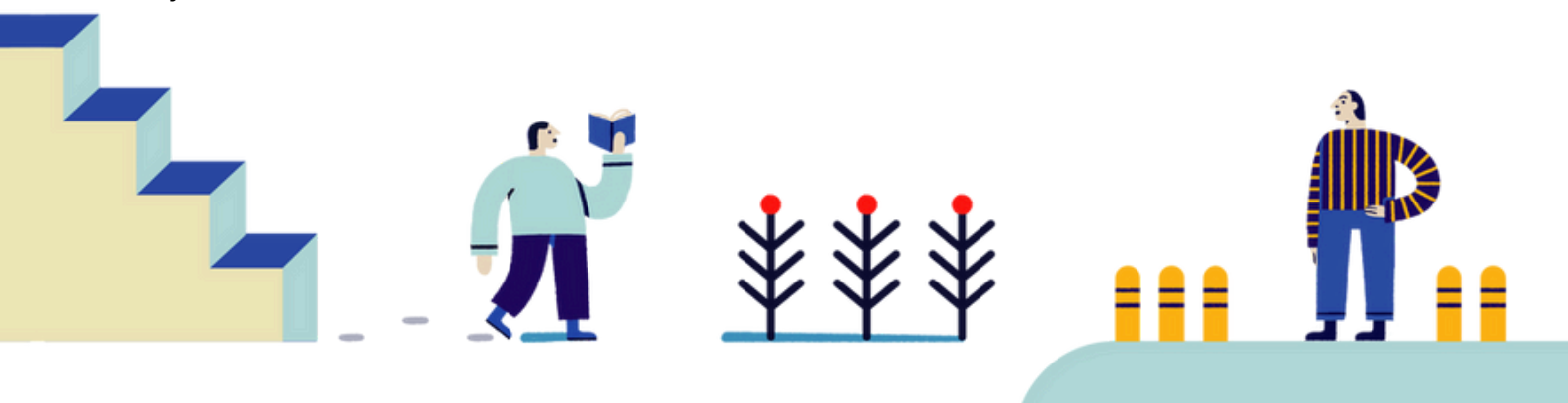
So I have an uglier, much uglier kind of anger

Irene:

It is said that men have a problem with violence, more or less severe, not because they have a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads from birth, nor for pseudo-genetic reasons. Men have a problem with violence because children (male children, TN) are not given the opportunity to express themselves through language that does not involve it.

The ultimate goal of this podcast is to reflect on male violence against women, and of course it takes time; the road is not always straight, and the shortest route is not always the one that leads to the best results. But every now and then in this obstacle course, we encounter important turning points: this is the first one. When we talk about a man who has committed femicide, that is, who has killed a woman because she did not behave as she should have, according to him and according to society, we often talk about a fit of rage: I don't know what happened to him, he went crazy. Or we dehumanize the man who committed the crime, saying that someone like that is a monster, a beast, not a human being. Elena Cecchetti, the sister of Giulia Cecchetti, a victim of femicide, said publicly, 'Monsters are not sick, they are healthy children of patriarchy'. How can we think that one femicide every three days can be explained each time by the story of a man who has gone mad? One femicide every three days is not an exception, it is the rule. And we are called upon to analyze it collectively.

Every person, if not educated to accept their emotions, name them, and then manage them, lives at the mercy of these emotions. And if the only emotions they can express are violent ones, they will live a life with the constant risk of exploding. This would work for anyone.



It's just that we as a society, especially men, grow up that way and so we have the male category that is at risk of violent behavior.

And, as we saw some time ago, it's a vicious circle that is more difficult to break if a male role model who questions this violence does not enter a man's life. Who proposes alternative behavior. Who tells another man that it is normal to cry and that not being able to do so is also a form of violence that is inflicted. And when you realize this, it is not over yet, because at that point you would feel the need to explore this issue with someone whose job it is to listen to people's problems, but you still have that voice in your head telling you that you have to do it on your own.

Everything is connected, everything. Forget about men being from Mars and women being from Venus, we are all part of this society that is raising us this way. And the first way to reverse this trend is to talk about it.

That's why I remind you that you can also answer this question by going to www.irenebacheris.it/tuttigliuomini and filling out the anonymous form. You will hear some of the testimonies in 15 days, at the beginning of the next episode.

Exceptionally, however, we will hear from each other again next Friday for the first bonus episode.

I told you, I like to surprise you. See you in 7 days.

Until then, remember, these matters concern all men. Because all men have the extraordinary privilege of being able to be heard by other men, such as those who will never listen to this podcast. Talk to them. Talk to each other. Change things.

