

ALL MEN

MALE VOICES TELLING THEIR STORIES TO MAKE A CHANGE

06 Talking about it among male friends

Excerpts of testimonies are heard

Man 1:

Okay, but why has it never come up, even though we've known each other for maybe 20 years and we talked about everything?

Man 2:

You have to be really motivated to get into these conversations.

Man 3:

For God's sake, mind your own business, no, no, NO.

Musical interlude

Irene:

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

Today's episode officially opens the second part of the interview, dedicated to relationships with other men. From the spoilers you've just heard, you can already understand how this topic is anything but superficial. In fact, we'll be dealing with it for seven episodes. And then? And then it will be time to talk about relationships with women, which will take even longer. This is to let you know that this podcast and these voices will be with us for many months, so find a comfortable position and get ready to listen.

Before moving on to today's question, I'll play you some of the testimonies you left last time, when I asked you about your relationship with emotions and expressing them.

Testimony 1:

Terrible. I realize that I am always extremely controlled, I never get angry, I never cry in public, I never cheer with joy. These are emotions that I obviously feel, but I don't express them. I am always afraid of being judged, or that someone might think I am ridiculous.

Testimony 2:

I have learned through therapy to recognize them, but I still find it difficult to show them because I am oppressed by a tremendous sense of shame. I am ashamed to expose myself, I am ashamed to show a different side of myself, I am afraid of letting my guard down, and I am afraid of being hurt. When I am alone, I can cry from sadness, from happiness, etc., but when I am with others, I try to filter everything.

Testimony 3:

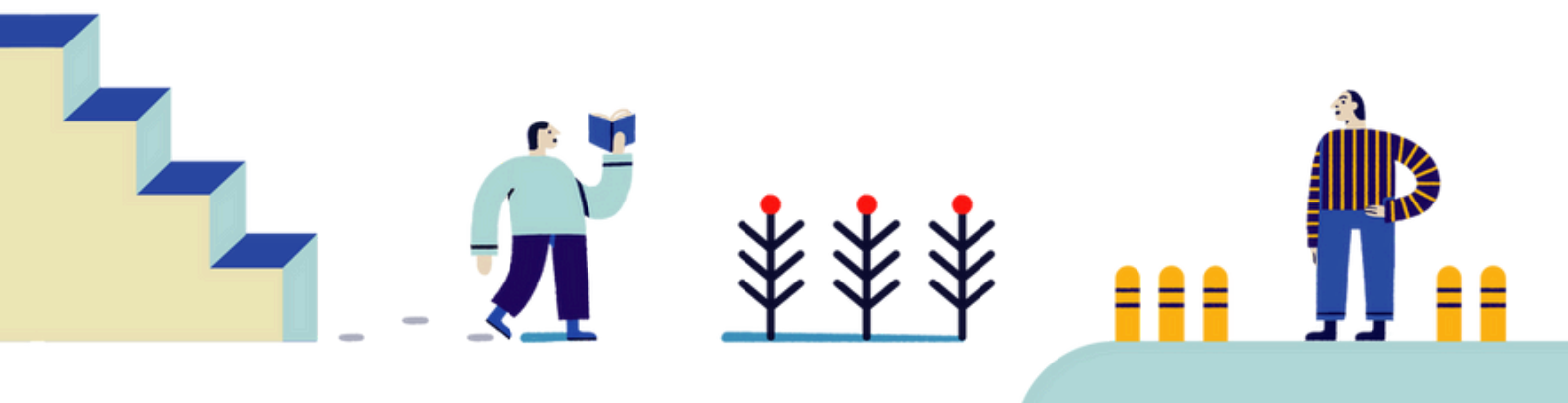
Except for when I was just a child, for a very long time I learned not to have emotions, except when I exploded. And then the excesses of rage or self-harming thoughts would come, and I would lock myself in my room, alone, crying and screaming into my pillow so that no one could hear me or help me. It hurt me so much.

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 here to talk about it will be men, because if the problem is systemic, the solution has to be collective.

As I was saying, today's question opens the chapter dedicated to relationships with other men, and it goes something like this:

Do you ever talk about these issues with your friends? If so, what kind of conversations are they? And if not, why do you think that is?



Man 1:

Yes, there are different types of friends. Obviously, there are friends who think like you, with whom you talk to support each other, to reinforce what you think and also to find some comfort when you see that your other colleagues of the same gender don't think the same way. Then there are friends whom you still love but who don't take this step, either out of laziness or hearsay. And when these things come up, there's always the question: now, how do I tell them that they've said something stupid? This is problematic in two ways. First of all, because obviously you have to find the right way without sounding like you're lecturing them, etc. And secondly, because I am the first to question myself as an authority. So I don't like to set myself up as a moral authority. But at the same time, I believe that if there is a chance that a small testimony, a small thought, can disrupt the autopilot in the way they look at these issues, then it is my duty to do so because no one else can.

Man 2:

So I do talk about it, yes. Not as much as I think I should. What tends to happen is that maybe we start off well and then it fizzles out into a joke. What happens is that maybe we don't really go into depth. Talking about it certainly makes things real, but it doesn't necessarily mean that we actually get involved.

Man 3:

So it happens to me, in the sense that I try to make it happen, and every time it's terribly frustrating, and there's no response even from people I consider to be valid, intelligent, beautiful people, and who I know definitely have sensitivity on the issue. But if there was a time when, perhaps taking inspiration from a news story, unfortunately, or from a statement by some politician who says something nasty, I tried and still try to address the issue in the chat, or when you see headlines in the newspapers following a femicide and the journalist focuses on the "poor man who had been left, who was very lonely and is now crying, who is very sad," I try to say yes, but this narrative makes no sense and this stuff should make everyone's skin crawl. Let's talk about it. There is a cosmic, pneumatic void in the chat. That half hour, that hour passes, and then the subject changes. And in person, they can't do that, but the conversation lasts two sips of beer and then someone gets up and changes the subject.



So I try to. I try to, because I understand (because I read about it, not because I woke up smart, I simply read and understood) that this is important, that men should do it, and I'm trying to do it, but I can't find anyone to talk to about it.

Man 4:

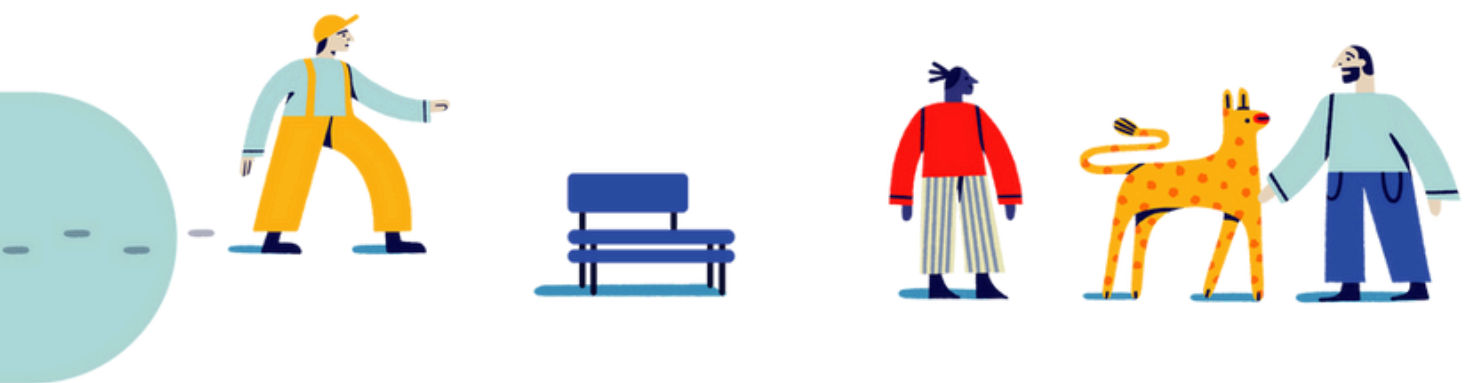
So, in my relationship with men, let's say I don't go there. I'm not going to bring this topic up, because I know I'll get myself into a mess that I don't know if I'll be able to emerge unscathed. I rarely hang out with just men. It's easier for me to make pizza with my girlfriends, but pizza with my male friends is rare. I don't bring up the subject. Like, "I wanted to say, did you read that article?" For God's sake, mind your own business. No, no, no. If someone else brings it up, I won't be so cowardly as to change the subject, but I don't like to go out of my way to talk about issues concerning gender relations. It feels a bit like an ambush to me, I put myself in the other person's shoes. If someone comes up and says, "But what do you think?" Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch!

So, what can I say to prevent them from taking it the wrong way? Who knows what they'll say? Maybe they're people I respect, but they open their mouths and say something unacceptable, and I think 'Holy Jesus, why did I ever ask. So no, let's say that on the very few occasions when I'm alone with men, no. Maybe we talk about the difficulties of being a parent, about my wife being the way she is, about work or politics... we'd rather talk about politics, so I've said it all. At least there I know who I'm dealing with and I know whether I should argue or not, my position is clear.

That's something that, in my opinion, distinguishes this topic from many others. Whereas if you talk about soccer, I know that if someone is a Milan fan, since I'm an Inter fan, the teasing will start. If we talk about politics, I know that he votes differently from me, so the teasing will start, and if I know that he's on my side, we'll argue about how we're not good enough and blah blah blah. On this topic, there's no card, it doesn't say 'look, I'm quite rude, so watch out', and they are above suspicion. I've met people who seemed very polite to me, but then we touched on that topic and they were as crude as they come. My goodness, what a disappointment, what a nasty thing, it's really a struggle and a surprise, an ambush. In fact, I don't know who I'm talking to because it's not true that because I respect someone, I love someone, he won't say things that I find unacceptable.

Man 5:

Not much. Partly because I don't consider it strictly necessary, in the sense that I still have few male friends. They are probably my closest friends, but there are few of them.



And all the male friends I do have are, on average, already well-informed on the subject, men who don't really fit the male stereotype, so I've never felt a great urge to talk about it with them. When it does happen, what's it like? Pleasant. In the sense that it's surprising that men can talk about a subject that has never come up, even though we've known each other for maybe twenty years and have talked about everything else.

I think that when we do talk about it, we start from the concrete situation or from current events or femicide. We say, OK, what went wrong in that situation? But always a bit like outside observers, it's still a bit difficult to feel included in the topic, both as co-responsible parties and as men who are under social pressure to reflect a gender, to conform to a gender.

But when we talk about it, I see that there is still a tendency to talk about it as if we were talking about newspaper headlines or news items on TV, seeing it as outside observers, without feeling fully included or relating it to our daily lives.

Man 6:

Not really, not often. Most of the time there's no interest, it's as if other things take priority, because when the conversation turns to more serious and less convivial topics, this isn't something that comes up often. We talked about it on Women's Day, my colleague and I were there and we talked about it, but the conversations are always a bit... we never get into the specifics of the issue. It's almost as if it's shameful to talk about these things, in the sense that probably some of my male friends, in order not to seem less strong, avoid talking about it and admitting something that maybe they also think.

Man 7:

It happened to me. Usually the trigger is perhaps some unpleasant news story, so it becomes impossible not to talk about it, and at that point there are different positions within a group of friends. "No, I have to teach my daughter to defend herself, because that's the only way to respond to this." "No, I want to teach my son instead, because the small contribution I can try to make to the world is to raise a boy who has a different culture from that person, and if everyone did this, that culture wouldn't exist."

In short, there are so many positions that at a certain point you start talking about these issues.



What I see is that sometimes it gets trivialized, sometimes it's difficult to talk about because you don't want to come across as self-righteous, you don't want to come across as the heavy one who gets into too much detail, you don't want to come across as a feminist, so maybe you just mention it and let it go. You have to be really motivated to get into these discussions, because usually when you're in a WhatsApp group with your fantasy football friends, the atmosphere is generally one of joking around, a light-hearted atmosphere, so if you decide to bring up a topic like this, you know you're completely changing the tone of the discussion.

Man 8:

It happens to me and has happened to me often. Fortunately, my close circle of friends has always been inclined to reflect on their own behavior, so these are conversations we actually had quite often. Obviously, not going back too far, it's something we started doing maybe from the age of 20 onwards. Now, especially since it's talked about much more, it's something that comes up quite a lot, even when looking back on our behavior, so now we look at the group behavior we had as males towards females and as a group of males together.

Man 9:

It's too easy for me to do that with my friends, because I live in a bubble. Basically, from this point of view, I have friends who are fabulous men, and none of them... oh God, you can never say never, because as you often say: what if it were your friend? What if it were your brother doing that stuff? You know, don't expect it. But so far, I have to say that it hasn't happened. So I live in this bubble where, yes, we talk about it, it can happen that we talk about it, but not in great depth. We cut it short because we know we all think the same way.

Man 10:

Pretty much. At least in this respect, I can consider myself quite lucky, because the people I've met in my adult life and with whom I have relationships are people I've also met thanks to my research on these kinds of issues, so at least there is some awareness of these issues.



Man 11:

There has certainly been a lot of change over time. Talking about my gender issues was part of everyday life, for example during my university years but also during my school years. It's just that you didn't realize you were only talking about it from one side, only in one way, or taking it for granted that everyone around you basically already agreed on the basis of these discussions, and instead you were only talking about what had happened here and what was best to do here or what was best to say here and there. A deeper level and therefore also a necessary change in relationships came later, when what seemed to be just talking about things that happened to me or to you became more political, more general, that is, what is happening to US, how WE behave, how we act as a gender or a group. And that's when some people distanced themselves, because they didn't feel part of this US. "No, I'm not like that, I'm not interested in this stuff, this stuff doesn't involve me, it's not what I want to talk about." On the other hand, I gained other friends and men with whom to talk about these things, because they recognized themselves in this WE, in this WE of gender, and relationships very different from traditional friendships were born. Relationships where we didn't see each other in person a lot but with great intensity, because with those people you said things in certain circumstances that never came out in other places.

Man 12:

Actually, with very few friends, and especially those who I know are sensitive to the issue, because I know that others are not as interested. So I talk about it with friends, but only a select few. People with whom I know I can talk about this issue because I know that on the other side there is someone who knows what we are talking about. We always talk about something related to a news story, and in reality, they are very easy conversations, in the sense that they are not rants or university lectures on the subject, but we discuss it if someone thinks differently or has a different interpretation. We discuss it, but they are normal conversations, just like we would talk about any other subject.

Man 13:

Yes, it happens to me. It's pretty good, in the sense that my definition of friends involves a selection process, so it feels a bit like being in a bubble. I mean, if the world were like the friends around me, it would be a perfect world, in the sense that there wouldn't be a lot of problems. What I notice is that among the male friends I interact with, none of them fall into a type of masculinity that we could define as 'toxic'.



It must be said that not all of them are feminists. There are friends who, especially in recent years, I occasionally argue with because they say things like, "But feminism, these feminists..." And then you have to discuss it a bit, because you have to try to understand what the issue is and what situations and circumstances led the person to express that opinion.

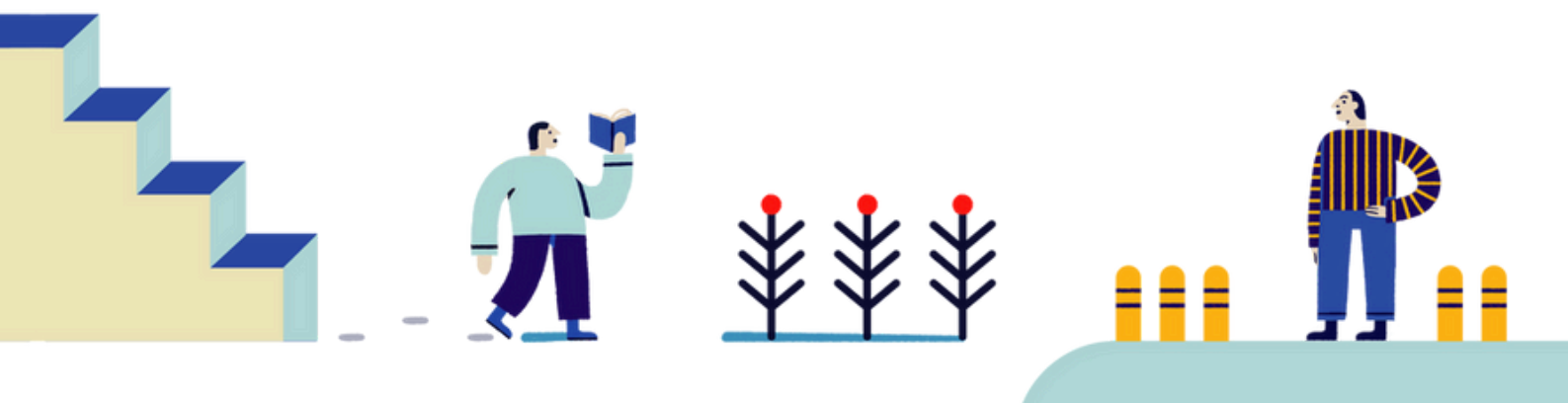
Man 14:

I only talk about these issues with my friends, and I think this is something that sometimes bothers and annoys me, because even my so-called "woke" friends (in quotation marks because clearly there are always stories to explore and there can be limits there too) are somewhat aware of patriarchy and the culture of violence. I've had trouble talking about it with other people who don't know the right terminology. When you start with these kinds of topics, a certain type of male feels like, 'What is that stuff?'. As if it were part of a language different from his. It's as if I were speaking another language. I can have conversations more or less with people who already agree with me. That's the scary thing. Maybe it's something related to... In racism, there's the concept of white fragility, right? I don't know if you can say male fragility in the male world. It's as if someone wanted to say, 'No, I'm not like that'.

Sometimes I admit that if I have to be honest with certain people, I lack the courage to tackle these issues, because I know that they lack a cultural foundation.

Man 15:

I have very few relationships, and with almost all of them I only talk about very serious things. That is, I don't have superficial relationships because I'm not capable of them. Is it a flaw or a virtue? I don't know. Neither one nor the other, it's just a characteristic. I can't make small talk, I can't talk about things that don't interest me, and I'm only interested in very serious things. But when I talk about it with other men, I surround myself with men I feel comfortable talking to about these things. I often talk about it with the few friends I have, and we usually agree on many points. It's usually like old people when they talk about their illnesses, they meet and say, "How are you?" "Eh, no, I'm terrible." "Eh, but imagine me." So that's kind of what I do. It's an old age that I've always known and that I share with friends who are just as old, we talk about this stuff and say, "Ah, thank goodness we can talk about it among ourselves." It's a bit sad, but that's how it is.



Man 16:

Yes, it happens to me. It happens very often, actually, because over the years I think I've had the strength to select the male friends around me and somehow I've managed to surround myself with healthy male friendships. When I talk to them, I feel very comfortable, I feel very at home, in a way I never felt during my adolescence or childhood. The complicated part comes when I think about my childhood friends, whom I am still friends with and whom I see from time to time. Unfortunately, in recent years, I have realized that I don't have the same feeling and the same sense of being at home and understood with those childhood friends as I do with the new friends I have made throughout my life.

This is one of the things that hurts me the most, because I love these people, but I realize that they haven't had the same experiences that I've had, and sometimes they don't understand, and it's very difficult to empathize with them. This hurts me a lot because I love them very much and I can't say goodbye to them.

Man 17:

Which friends? Question: are we talking about women's issues with other men or about the perception of masculinity in society? Because if we're talking about the big issue of being a woman and how it's perceived in our society, yes, it has happened to me, almost always with the intention of somehow elevating women in a poetic way, as unique, enlightened creatures incapable of making mistakes because they are pure and a source of wisdom. If, on the other hand, we are talking about the perception of masculinity in society, yes, that has happened to me too, but it is certainly not a topic that I have been able to discuss with everyone, or at least that I have felt comfortable discussing with all my male friends, given that, frankly, I have very few, but when it did happen, I had to feel able to do so, and I always needed to be reassured that there was no judgement on the part of the other person, because if I had perceived even the slightest hint of an Alpha Male, I wouldn't have said anything. And when I did, it was almost always younger guys, which makes communication easier because somehow it almost seems like it's not equal. So this gave me the confidence to take a paternalistic approach (which is really funny to say in this podcast), it gave me the impression that I was in charge of the subject and that I could then explain to younger guys things that I thought were important.



Musical interlude

Irene:

Here we are. I would like to start with the last man's question: what does it mean to talk about these issues? Does it mean talking about how patriarchy hurts women or how patriarchy hurts men?

Because from many people's answers, it seems that talking about these issues means talking about the news of the day, except that the news of the day often concerns male violence against women. So what kind of conversations can arise? Especially if, as many have said, they remain superficial? After we have said that the perpetrator of a femicide is a monster, so we can allow ourselves the luxury of describing ourselves as different from him because we are human, instead of saying that he is also a man and therefore having to make the effort to ask ourselves how we are similar to him, what else do we have to say? Nothing.

The conversation lasts as long as two sips of beer. But that's because there is a basic belief that this issue does not concern the people at the pub table. I would never do such a thing, my friends would never do such a thing. Except that every perpetrator of femicide is someone's friend.

At first, it made me very angry to hear how superficially some men talked about these issues. I thought: it must be nice to be you, to be part of your category.

What an enormous privilege it is to be able to talk about femicide for five minutes and then change the subject, because it means that you don't feel close to it, that it's not talking about you, but in the sense that you feel safe. I've lost count of the conversations I've had with my girlfriends about whether it's legal or not to carry a key ring, whether a loud alarm is enough, or whether we should carry a key ring complete with pepper spray and a nail punch, as if we lived in Sunnydale. Did you know? They already sell them ready-made, even in pastel colors. There are lots of them on Etsy. How do I know? Because I had to Google "women's street safety." Who knows how many useful conversations we could have had about our personal growth and professional success, but instead, the fear of not making it home alive monopolized our conversation. How I wish these issues had lasted me two sips of beer instead of two decades.

But then I felt that there was more to it than anger and envy. I felt a little sad for men, and I only understood why thanks to the last interviewee's question.



Man 1:

"Are we talking about women's issues with other men or about the perception of masculinity in society?"

Irene:

Most of the men interviewed understood the question in the first way. For many, the idea of being able to talk to other men about male issues is simply not an option. And I say that it saddens me because I remember well what was said about expressing emotions last time, and I feel that it's all connected. I can't bring myself to tell a friend that I feel burdened by having to perform the role of the tough, strong male, because who knows what he'll think of me, but above all, who knows what I'll think of myself. We'll devote an entire episode to this when we discover (spoiler alert) that even when they talk about it with their female friends, this topic doesn't come up.

It must also be said that not all contexts are the most appropriate for dealing with certain issues. If you go out for a bite, perhaps you want something light-hearted and it's understandable that certain conversations are dropped. Maybe you have the best of intentions, you understand that the issue concerns you for more than one reason, but maybe you don't feel like dealing with it on a Friday evening after a week of work. Of course, you can say, "I don't feel like it right now," and we come back to the issue of privilege, but it is true that not all contexts are suitable for all content. However, contexts can be found, and settings can be constructed. You can meet once with the stated goal of discussing a topic. Feminists have been doing this for 50 years. They are called self-awareness meetings. They began in the 1970s.

Women would meet among themselves and talk about their problems. And in talking about them, they realized that they weren't just personal problems, because when the third woman raised her hand to say, "My husband beats me," it was hard to believe that all three of them had done something to make their husbands angry, and you began to wonder if it wasn't a habit of husbands to beat their wives. That's when you realize that your problem isn't yours, it's society's. And that's when you can stop feeling guilty and wondering what you did wrong. Men are missing 50 years of self-awareness. Fifty years of meetings only among men where they can talk freely about how patriarchy is hurting them and how they have the power to change things. Perhaps if such a space were created, the conversations would last longer. There are a few spaces like this, but nothing prevents you from creating others for your own circle of friends. Nothing prevents it except the sad conviction that, deep down, this doesn't concern you.



In fact, the podcast is taking a summer break, and the next episode will be on Friday, September 6. The topic, I can already tell you, will be soccer chat. Luckily, we have more than a month to prepare. In the meantime, you can try to answer the questions from previous episodes if you haven't already done so (you can find them all on my website) and maybe try to read something on the subject. I left you some reading recommendations in last week's bonus episode. We'll be back in September.

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.

