

'It should be studied by every father and read to every son.'

Anthony C. Gruppo, Former International CEO

RETHINKING MASCULINITY

A modern
man's guide
to succeeding
in life



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PART ONE

UNDERSTANDING MASCULINITY





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Twenty-first Century Masculinity

I'll be honest: you probably won't want to hear what I'm about to share, but the fact that you picked up this book shows a part of you knows you need to hear it. The truth is, many men today are feeling lost. They are unknowingly living a default life, dictated by parental conditioning, societal norms and commercial consumerism. Time flashes by as they get caught up in living professionally successful but unfulfilling lives.

Modern men strive to achieve success. From the outside, it seems like their lives are 'textbook' perfect – they have the German car, the expensive house, the beautiful family, but underneath the surface, these men are struggling by the time they reach middle age and begin the second half of their lives. Their career is defined by firefighting. A full diary means no time to focus on family, health or friends (the things they say they value). Their relationship with their partner feels distant, as does their connection with their children. Health and fitness have taken a back seat for years.

When you see a man who's successful, you're seeing the result of his effort. You're not seeing what it's taken for him, and from him, to get

where he is. The reality is, this default path takes a lot. In this situation, men feel like they have to hide their dissatisfaction, believing that they're alone in feeling this way. Part of the 'silent majority', they're quietly suffering and letting the days pass them by without truly understanding the consequences of their inaction.

I've been there, too. Having ticked many of the 'right' boxes, I was pretty secure in the fact that I was winning in the game of life, but deep down, I felt exactly like the men I described above. Then, I reached a breaking point as I became a father and began to assess my life. Unlike what many men experience, my break was a breakthrough and I wound up recalibrating my life. With a new focus on purpose, fulfilment and legacy, I have successfully left behind my superficially successful past.

Now I want to share my message and experience with other men who already suspect there's more to life than work, but find themselves asking, 'What template of life am I meant to follow?' Masculinity is at a crossroads and the men of our era get to choose which direction we lead ourselves and future generations of men; to craft our legacy. As ancient Greek politician Pericles said, 'What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.'

I have moved away from what I call the old blueprint of masculinity, the default template. Instead, I propose the BetterMen blueprint, which encourages men to live an intentional life, defined by high levels of presence, purpose and performance – a life by design. Men following this blueprint develop clear life goals and purpose-driven habits.

My promise to you is that if you approach this book with an open mind, you will be rewarded with life-changing realisations and the skills for a happy and purposeful new life. As Chinese philosopher Confucius said, 'We have two lives; the second begins when we realise we only have one.' Consider this the beginning of your second life. In

this chapter, you'll start to understand the common problems with masculinity as we experience it today, many of which may resonate with you.

THE OLD BLUEPRINT OF MASCULINITY

The path to a happier, healthier and more meaningful life as a high-performing man starts with understanding the root of the problem. From the moment we were born, we have been exposed to cultural expectations, media and social hierarchies that handed us a blueprint of masculinity we still unconsciously follow to this day. The problem? That blueprint, passed down from our fathers' and grandfathers' generation, is no longer fit for purpose in our digitally connected twenty-first-century world.

Let's dive into the roots of this blueprint.

Childhood conditioning

If you're old enough, cast your mind back to the popular TV shows and films on air in the seventies and eighties. Young boys everywhere watched in awe as Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Van Damme ran, punched and shot their way across the screen. Now think about the famous football and rugby players of the day. The strong, unemotional machines at peak physical performance. Think about the fathers on TV shows, acting as the fearsome disciplinarian. Across media and sports, young boys saw adult men as detached, physically strong and decisive.

These male archetypes bled from the screen and into real life on the playground at school. Boys were encouraged to play rough, join sports teams and excel physically, but the enjoyment of exercise was marred by a sense of needing to outperform peers and, for personal

safety in the playground, adopt an attitude of conformity and 'survival of the strongest'. Many were told to be strong and to 'man up' because 'boys don't cry'. Perhaps their fathers also embodied these traits.

Young boys were taught to always exhibit 'appropriate' gender behaviours. If they didn't uphold those expectations, they were likely ridiculed and made to feel different, to feel inferior. This stopped them from expressing how they felt. Boys learned to suppress their feelings, reject their emotions and numb their experience. Every single day, they were conditioned to believe that this narrow, one-dimensional definition of masculinity was 'the' blueprint: a blueprint that they would have to follow to be successful and to be a 'real man' in adulthood.

Present-day masculinity

As they grew up, most boys of this generation followed the blueprint and are the middle-aged men of today, many of them on the upward curve in their careers. They got married, had 2.4 children and bought a dog. They see themselves as providers and breadwinners and they identify with the 'traditional' masculine traits of being strong, silent and successful.

In the 'game of life', these men may feel they're winning, but underneath that thin veneer of success... it seems more like they're losing. Countless men question, 'Is this it...?' and spend hours analysing, procrastinating and ruminating – stuck in their own head. Staring at the phone screen, they lose time on social media, scrolling through their feeds and seeing men with bigger houses, nicer cars and seemingly perfect relationships, because no one's posting the truth of their reality.

Many men actually feel alone, isolated and lost in their own thoughts. My clients have told me that they feel like they are physically in the room with their families, but not really present. They come home

from work to their children talking about their day at school, but it all seems so trivial, my clients just can't engage. They can't switch off from work and connect.

The novelist Mark Twain once said, 'The worst loneliness is to not be comfortable with yourself.' Modern men are on an uncomfortable path of loneliness and real but confusing unhappiness. The problem is, we've been taught *what* to think, not *how* to think. In our modern world, the one-dimensional model of masculinity, of protecting and providing, isn't enough.

We'll now unpack some of the main challenges contributing to the sense of unhappiness and unease that so many men face, particularly in middle age. If you see yourself in these pages, know that you are not alone and that this book will provide answers, enabling you to live a more aligned and meaningful life.

CHALLENGE 1: WORKAHOLISM AND BURNOUT

Adhering to strict gender roles, countless men (including me) got jobs and started climbing the career ladder from an early age. What nobody told us is that the ladder can quickly become a slippery slope, leading to workaholism, and then burnout.

The addiction of workaholism

Workaholism starts with us enthusiastically contributing to a career or business, but over time transforms into us developing obsessive perfectionist traits. The weight of work becomes a looming shadow over everything. Late nights in the office are fuelled by high levels of stress and this becomes the norm. Family members and friends recognise that the workaholic is spending less time with them; the workaholic feels a sense of guilt for choosing work over life, but they do it anyway.

Being addicted to work is a genuine problem, but it has somehow become accepted by society and accepted in marriages as a valid reason not to put the time and effort in. As we'll discuss later, it's also a contributing factor in divorce. Many men don't even know that they may be workaholics.

Some key warning signs are:

- Thinking of how to free up more time to work
- Spending much more time working than originally planned
- Working to reduce feelings of guilt or anxiety
- Becoming stressed if prohibited from working
- Deprioritising hobbies, leisure activities and exercise because of work

This likely resonates for a lot of high-performing men. Work completely takes over their lives. Have you ever stopped to consider why it is that when you ask someone what they do, their immediate response is usually their job title? This is the societal conditioning I'll be sharing more about later.

With the increase in working from home, the line between work and life has blurred even further. Losing the commute means that many professional men are now unable to switch off in their own home. While they're on important calls, loved ones expect them to be available because they're in the home. My clients describe tip-toeing into the kitchen to boil the kettle, hoping not to have their work interrupted by the trivialities of family life. The delicate knife-edge that so many men were balancing on before the COVID-19 pandemic has been tipped. Burnout is more common than ever – a survey of 2,000 British workers highlighted this, as over 73% of respondents stated that they felt burned out after the pandemic.¹

The five stages of burnout

It's possible you already know what burnout feels like, either from personal experience or having witnessed the implosion of a colleague or peer. For confirmation, it feels like a constant state of exhaustion, anxiousness, isolation and irritability. It feels like waking up in the morning after a terrible night's sleep with a sense of dread, while pretending that everything is 'OK'. Knowing that you'll be constantly firefighting. Not being able to take a lunch break. Coming home and collapsing on the sofa, feeling apathetic and bingeing on Netflix and social media because, sadly, that's the only thing you can muster the energy to do.

How does being the 'classic workaholic' get to this point? There are five defined stages that may lead to burnout.²

The first stage is the **honeymoon phase**. This simply involves high job satisfaction and is a normal and healthy beginning to any role. Next, the **stress** begins. Work becomes harder and less enjoyable, optimism may fade and feelings of stress creep in. This may manifest as a lack of sleep, headaches and no social interaction.

Stage three is **chronic stress**, in which high levels of stress are felt frequently. This, of course, leads to **burnout**, when symptoms of stress become critical. It's impossible to continue as normal and it's increasingly difficult to cope. People with burnout feel helpless, trapped, unmotivated and detached. Finally, **habitual burnout** means that these symptoms have become ingrained in day-to-day life, creating ongoing mental, physical and emotional challenges.

Believe me, men all over the country are experiencing this. Perhaps you're feeling burned out, too. If you are, using the scale above, what stage are you at? Burnout is all too common, and with it, other challenges arise.

Let's explore another challenge delivered by the old blueprint of masculinity: loneliness.

CHALLENGE 2: LONELINESS

Shortly before I started to write this book, I was out for a run while listening to a podcast. The host asked, 'In your hour of need, who would you call?' This sparked an uncomfortable moment of self-reflection for me.

I realised that I would not call my childhood best friends, the men who had been best men at my wedding. We were on completely different life trajectories. For years, we'd been going through the motions, saying we'd meet up but 'life' would always get in the way. In reality, we were just in different places. This made me angry at first. Then it made me think.

Many male friendships are based on past experiences, like playing sports or going to school or university together. They're transient, based on a moment in time. This is probably why we drift, leading to 32% of men stating they don't have a best friend.³ Reports show, in fact, that 35% of men admit to feeling lonely at least once a week and that 10% would prefer to keep this hidden because of internal shame.⁴ Because men's feelings are underreported, it's likely that these numbers are, in reality, much higher than this.

When you take into consideration the extraordinary numbers of men experiencing workaholism and burnout, it's no surprise that there is an epidemic of real and deep male loneliness. Socrates, a Greek philosopher considered a forefather of Stoicism, said, 'Beware the barrenness of a busy life.' There is a lot of wisdom in those words. Men find themselves so busy that life becomes empty, but there's more to this puzzle and a key piece is not discussing our feelings.

Resistance to discussing feelings

Men's loneliness is compounded by a resistance to speaking about and discussing their feelings. In fact, 38% of men say that they have avoided talking to others about how they feel so as not to appear

unmanly,⁵ but isolation leads to amplification of problems. Many men (43%) wish that they could talk more to others about personal problems they have experienced.⁶ There is an incorrect but shame-inducing sense that talking about their feelings makes them 'weak'. This leaves a lot of men feeling trapped, unable to speak up.

One participant in a Movember UK survey of men aged forty-five to fifty-four stated, 'To be manly is to always try to act tough even when you feel like you just want to break down and cry.'⁷ All too often, men 'armour up' to protect themselves from the perceived judgement of others, but never thinking about, expressing or discussing our feelings results in a deep loneliness.

I often hear my clients say things like, 'I don't believe I am allowed to feel like I am struggling, but I am'; 'I mean, I should be grateful for what I've achieved, but I am not'; 'Compared to what's happening in the world, my problems aren't that bad'. As we will discuss, lots of men feel this way, but because we learn by modelling other men, we have no idea we aren't alone.

The impact of social media

Convenient but superficial digital connections only make things worse. We are lonelier than ever, watching our network's lives unfold through a little screen in our hands, instead of experiencing their lives with them. COVID-19 has only made this worse, with screen time increasing by 50–70% during the pandemic.⁸

To be clear, I am not against social media; it has given a powerful and necessary voice to prominent social issues. What I am against is how we as a society exploit the ease and expedient nature of our digitally connected 'togetherness'.

Even before the prominence of Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, men were skilled at keeping conversations at a surface and superficial level. Now, interacting through a device, face conveniently hidden from view, many men have mastered the art of avoiding and evading

any conversation that might require them to reveal how they feel. Their screens become a mask for their loneliness.

The risks of loneliness

Being lonely is a risk. Social relationships have been proven to protect both mental and physical wellbeing. As demonstrated in the seventy-five-year longitudinal Harvard Happiness Study, people with meaningful social relationships are happier, have better long-term health and live longer than those without.⁹ From decreasing stress and heart disease to increasing resilience, friendships do a lot more than we may think.

Isolation, on the other hand, only makes things worse. Problems become bigger in the vacuum of one's own mind. Clearly, something in the blueprint of what it means to be a man isn't working anymore. Men are left isolated, overworked and lonely.

This leads us to our next challenge: ongoing poor mental health.

CHALLENGE 3: POOR MENTAL HEALTH

There is a crisis in men's mental health today. A report by BeyondBlue support service says, 'On average, one in eight men will experience depression and one in five will experience anxiety in the course of their lives'.¹⁰ Actually, we can deduce that it's probably much more than that as men feel pressured and unable to discuss their feelings or mental health. This means that a large number of men's mental-health issues sadly go unreported.

Depression, anxiety and loneliness

Depression can be described as a low mood, a lack of interest in enjoyable activities and, at the extreme, suicidal thoughts. It's a

harbouring of sadness. Anxiety, on the other hand, is excessive worry and restlessness. It's a fear of the future, a life yet to be lived.

Many men feel overwhelmed in their work and unable to safely communicate their emotional needs, meaning we see sobering statistics on men's mental health, such as the fact that men aged forty to forty-nine have the highest suicide rates in the UK.¹¹ Men are also less likely to access psychological therapies than women: in the UK, only 36% of referrals to National Health Service talking therapies are for men.¹²

A common cause of poor mental health

The truth is, an overwhelming number of professionally successful men feel mentally busy, emotionally numb and physically tired. They hide from their feeling of discomfort and their sense that something is amiss by working more. As a result, they have no free time to spend on themselves or with the people they love. Over time, they can develop anxiety and depression, but stay silent because of the stigma and shame that is still attached to poor mental health.

A key element of this problem is the fact that men have been working to achieve the goals of others, chasing and trying to live up to societal success instead of living a life they enjoy. They've been ticking boxes in the 'game of life' with a rat-race mentality, not just keeping up with the Joneses, but beating them; constantly upgrading their house, car and holidays, without stopping to think if any of it really makes them happy. Their self-esteem is tied to their possessions, their diary reflects their priorities and their priorities are unquestionably work related. There is no room for real connection with others or themselves.

Lowering the numbers of male suicide and improving men's mental health means enabling men to seek support and ask for help. Personal happiness is available to every man, but it has to be consciously

chosen. Contrary to previous eras, we as men are now proving that we can't win at the game of life without high levels of real happiness.

CHALLENGE 4: MIDLIFE CRISIS

A midlife crisis is a well-known cultural phenomenon. It's usually sparked in middle age, which is a period in a man's life where he tends to question who he is, where he's going and who he's going with. During this time, many men will also question the validity of what they have achieved in life so far and worry about what's next for them. When this happens, men can feel lost, isolated and disconnected. It becomes a crisis.

Swiss explorer Bertrand Piccard said, 'A crisis accepted becomes an adventure and an adventure that we refuse will remain a crisis.' Unfortunately, the vast majority of middle-aged men end up with a crisis. They fall back on stereotypical releases, like buying a new car, learning to ride a motorbike, having a flirt or a fling, buying a new watch or signing up to some sort of physical challenge. Unsurprisingly, none of these things actually work; they just suppress, mask or delay the inevitability of the real issue.

The roots of a midlife crisis

There is often a gap between who we are and who we pretend to be. The bigger the gap, the bigger the void in our life and the greater our susceptibility to a midlife crisis. We may own the societal symbols of success and have the picture-perfect social-media profile, but if what we have isn't what we need, more of the same won't help.

We can have everything a man could need by the standards of societal success, but if these standards are wrong or outdated, then we'll never experience life as we expect it. That's exactly why we need to rethink and redefine the standards of modern-day masculinity.

It's hard to break ingrained habits and redefine standards. Many of my clients feel there's a sunk cost in their current way of living and they don't have the capacity to start again as they've invested so much into it. They find themselves struggling (which leads to more struggle). It's a crisis.

CHALLENGE 5: DIVORCE

A key indicator of successful masculinity in the traditional blueprint is getting married, but the problem is, expectations of what a marriage is have shifted. Men used to be the breadwinners and women were expected to stay home and look after the children. That's far from the case now. Societally, things are shifting, but often this hasn't yet caught up within the household, causing discord.

Men still feel they need to be the providers, which means workaholism leads to them taking their loved ones for granted. I find the old adage 'work gets the best of me, life gets what's left of me' fitting here to describe the situation. With no time invested in their relationship, couples lose the currency of intimacy: appreciation. Small frustrations snowball to resentments, and with men feeling unable to talk about their feelings, this then leads to distance. On top of all this, a sense of 'keeping up appearances' adds pressure to make it seem that all is well when actually, it's falling apart.

Many of my clients, when they eventually slow down and look up, find themselves in a marriage of practicality. They've become so busy working, looking after the house and raising the children that their marital drift has become tangible; there's no real relationship, connection or depth. They may be lying inches apart from their partner in bed every night, but they're miles apart in terms of connection.

Nobody wants to be in that situation, but after some time it becomes unmanageable and the only solution seems like divorce. The UK divorce rate is estimated at 42%, and in fact, over 100,000 British

couples got a divorce in 2019. The average male divorce age is forty-six to forty-nine.¹³

The COVID pandemic pulled back the curtain on what is happening behind closed doors: people just aren't happy in their relationships. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, divorce enquiries rose by a significant 122%.¹⁴ Social media impacts this, too, as 'perfect relationships' are projected online with no insight into what's really happening. The distance between people seems to keep on growing.

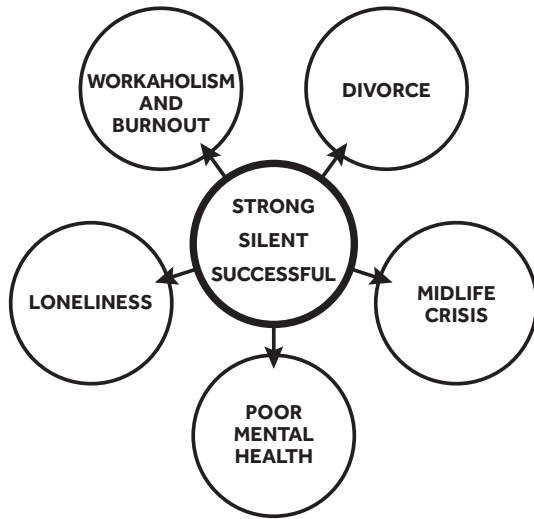
YOU'RE NOT ALONE

That's a brief introduction to the five key challenges of masculinity in the twenty-first century. Do you know what binds them all together? A feeling of shame. A feeling of being unable to talk about what life actually feels like. A feeling of isolation, inadequacy and loneliness. This is exactly the reason why these problems persist: because as men, we're not talking about them, we're not owning them and we're falling into traps of our own making.

I have little respect for the old blueprint of masculinity, the one that has caused the challenges I've shared. The system is no longer fit for purpose. When we're boys, the old blueprint tells us there are three things that we need to be a man:

- We have to be strong. It's the old, unhelpful narrative that big boys don't cry.
- We should be silent. It's much like the first rule of fight club – the first rule of being a man is don't talk about what it's like to be a man.
- Despite the now obvious costs to health and happiness, we have to be professionally successful.

This trifecta of intergenerational toxicity and conditioning is responsible for causing many of the problems modern men are experiencing.



The five challenges facing modern-day masculinity

I know as a gender, we can do and become better. I want men who are facing any of the five challenges above to know that they are not alone. I want them to start talking about it and taking proactive measures, like those you'll find in this book, to realign their lives and craft legacies they'll be proud of.

My client work and the men's walking group I lead, Men & Mountains, have shown me that men don't actually need much prompting to talk about these challenges. It's natural to talk. When we take away the artificial structure around what men can and can't say 'because they're men', we reach an understanding and can talk freely.

Peer-to-peer sharing is important because when there's commonality of experience and reasoning, it creates a high degree of psychological

and emotional safety. This makes sharing our authentic selves more permissible and encourages us to be more expressive: a key factor in promoting positive personal wellbeing. Essentially, when we as men have psychological safety, it's as if everything is able to come up and out.

Understanding this is the first step to throwing off the shackles of the old blueprint. We can take control. We're responsible for what we do and don't do; our decisions shape our direction. A few key mindset and lifestyle shifts can cause significant ripple effects that change our life's trajectory, something my clients have experienced time and time again.

My clients are the men who do the work to live with greater life clarity and deliberate purpose. They become effective leaders of themselves. They are living and role modelling a better version of masculinity and passing on a meaningful, lasting legacy. Are you ready to join them?

With this book, I aim to help you bust through the myth of masculinity, the flawed thinking that professional success equals personal happiness. It hasn't in the past; it doesn't. It won't. It's time to forget manning up and instead open up, because everything we as men do now matters. Society is at a crossroads when it comes to masculinity – and we decide our direction.

We'll talk more about fear later on in the book, but at this stage, I'll simply share with you the words of George Adair, a real-estate developer in the USA in the years following the Civil War: 'Everything you've ever wanted is on the other side of fear.' Don't allow yourself to be shut down, turn away from or ignore the discomfort of your day-to-day life. A man's work starts in pain. The pain you feel in your life, the frustration and dissatisfaction, is a message. Listen to it and learn from it as it's a message from yourself – your true self. After all the hard yards to get to where you are, you deserve to live a happy, healthy, fulfilling and successful life. Let's make it happen and step into the next chapter.

REFLECTION EXERCISES

Tony Robbins, the world-renowned personal-development 'guru', stated that, 'The quality of your life is a direct reflection of the quality of the questions you are asking yourself'.¹⁵ This is exactly why we'll be working on a reflection section at the end of every chapter.

It's important to approach these sections with an open mind and, if it's your thing, a pen and paper. This enables you to actively complete the exercises as you navigate through the book. Via thought-provoking questions, directly related to the chapter you've just read, these reflection sections will raise your levels of awareness and, if you commit to it, lay the foundations of meaningful change. If you feel like these questions detract from your read flow, feel free to read the book in its entirety, and then circle back to each of the nine reflection sections.

- If you were to honestly describe your current experience of life in only three words, what would those words be? Write them down somewhere safe or store them in your phone; you'll need them at the end of the book.
- Considering your life at your age and stage, are you where you thought you wanted to be? If not, why not?
- Regardless of your current mental-health state, what could you do more and less of to improve it?
- Like the question that stopped me in my tracks: who would you call in your hour of need and why?
- If someone you cared about was experiencing a midlife crisis, what advice would you give them?
- If you're in a relationship or marriage, on a scale of one to ten, one being low, ten being high, what score would you give it and why?