The Impact of Social Pressure on Men's Mental Health - Analysis of Social Expectations from the Perspective of Clinical Psychology

Anna Podolak[1], Agnieszka Zarotyńska[2] and Justyna Bieniara-Woźnicka[3]

[1]Academy of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ,
Poland

[2]Higher School of Business - National Louis University in Nowy Sącz,
Poland

[3]John Paul II Pontifical University in Krakow
Poland

Abstract— The article discusses the impact of social pressure on men's mental health, paying special attention to social expectations from the perspective of clinical psychology. Social pressure, which is a set of norms, values and expectations imposed by family, professional environment or media, can have both positive and negative effects. In men, it often takes the form of expectations regarding strength, independence and emotional resilience. The traditional model of masculinity places men in the role of strong, unweak individuals, which leads to difficulties in expressing emotions and an increased risk of depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior . Social expectations can cause the so-called "masked depression", which manifests itself in aggression, irritability and addictions, instead of classic depressive symptoms. Moreover, men are less likely than women to seek psychological help, which deepens problems related to emotional isolation and chronic stress. The article emphasizes the importance of changing the approach to masculinity, taking into account greater acceptance of expressing emotions and seeking support. The content of the article indicates the need to adapt preventive and educational activities to the specific needs of men, as well as the need to break the stereotypes of masculinity that make it difficult to use psychological help. From the perspective of clinical psychology, the diagnosis of the impact of social pressure is based on the identification of problems such as anxiety, depression or burnout, which may result from unrealistic social expectations. The article also discusses coping mechanisms, such as problem avoidance, aggression or addiction, which are the result of chronic stress caused by social pressure.

Keywords— social pressure, men's mental health, patterns of masculinity, emotions and emotional strength, masked depression, anxiety disorders, interpersonal relations, clinical psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), support groups, barriers to seeking help, emotional education

I. INTRODUCTION

Social pressure is a set of norms, values and expectations imposed on an individual by the social environment, such as family, professional environment or media. It can take the form of both direct pressure (e.g. requirements from parents or employers) and more subtle social mechanisms, such as stereotypes and cultural norms. This pressure can have both positive and negative effects - on the one hand, motivating development, and on the other, leading to stress, lower self-esteem or mental problems.

In the context of men, social pressure often takes the form of expectations of strength, independence, and emotional resilience. The traditional model of masculinity assumes that a "real man" should be dominant, ambitious, and insensitive to emotional difficulties (Connell, 2005). As noted by Levant and Wong (2017), this pressure can cause internal conflict and result in problems with expressing emotions, which increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behaviors.

Studies indicate that men who experience strong social pressure are more likely to suppress their emotions and are less likely to seek psychological help (Mahalik et al., 2003). An example of this phenomenon is the so-called "masked depression", which in men may manifest itself as aggression, irritability or reaching for psychoactive substances instead of

classic depressive symptoms such as sadness or social withdrawal (Seidler et al., 2016).

Clinical psychology draws attention to the negative consequences of social pressure on men's mental health, emphasizing the need to change the approach to masculinity and normalize the use of professional help (Galdas, 2009). Introducing more flexible patterns of masculinity, in which the expression of emotions and seeking support are accepted, may help reduce the negative effects of social expectations.

II. SOCIAL PRESSURES TOWARDS MEN – KEY SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

A. *The importance of mental health in men*

Mental health is a key part of a person's overall well-being, affecting their quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and professional functioning. For men, this topic has long been marginalized, in part because of persistent gender stereotypes that promote an image of men as tough, unwavering, and unflappable (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Such societal expectations can lead to serious mental health consequences.

According to research conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO), men are less likely than women to seek psychological help, which partly explains the higher suicide rate in this group (WHO, 2018). The lack of coping skills and the social pressure to remain strong and independent mean that men often struggle with mental health problems in isolation (Courtenay, 2000).

In Poland, this phenomenon is also attracting increasing attention from researchers and mental health specialists. As indicated by the results of research conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology in Warsaw, men more often than women report to specialists in the advanced stage of the disease, which reduces the effectiveness of treatment (Wciórka, 2012). This state of affairs requires a change in the approach to prevention and education about mental health.

The emphasis on promoting mental health among men should include educational activities, social campaigns, and adapting forms of support to the specific needs of this group. Research shows that programs that take into account male cultural patterns and social norms are more effective in encouraging men to use support (Seidler et al., 2016).

In summary, men's mental health is an important aspect of overall societal well-being. Understanding the impact of social pressures on the emotional functioning of this group and implementing appropriate interventions can contribute to improving the quality of life for many people.

B. *Traditional and contemporary patterns of masculinity*

The patterns of masculinity have undergone significant changes over the years. The traditional model of masculinity, referred to as hegemonic, is based on traits such as physical strength, independence, dominance, and emotional restraint (Connell, 1995). In this approach, the expression of emotions, especially those related to sadness or weakness, was seen as a sign of weakness and inconsistent with the gender role.

Contemporary patterns of masculinity are increasingly moving away from this model, promoting greater flexibility in expressing emotions and accepting diversity in men's life experiences (Kimmel, 2010). New approaches acknowledge the importance of relationships, mental health, and work-life balance. Research indicates that men who are more open to expressing emotions and seeking help experience better mental health (Levant et al., 2011).

C. *Expectation of emotional strength and avoidance of showing weakness*

One of the key elements of social expectations towards men is the requirement of emotional strength and avoiding the display of weakness. In many cultures, men are assigned roles based on dominance, control and emotional independence. Research indicates that such social norms can lead to the so-called " normative alexithymia ", or difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions (Levant et al., 2009). Men who experience pressure to remain stoic are more susceptible to anxiety disorders, depression and aggressive behavior (Jakubowska, 2015).

Lack of acceptance for showing weakness also leads to so-called emotional self-exclusion, where men avoid talking about emotional issues even with close people. Such emotional isolation can result in increased stress levels, sleep disorders and addictions, especially to alcohol and psychoactive substances. Studies show that men more often than women reach for risky strategies to cope with stress, which additionally worsens their mental health (Courtenay, 2000).

D. *The impact of social pressure on professional and family roles*

Social expectations regarding the role of men as the main breadwinners are still deeply rooted in many cultures. The model of traditional masculinity assumes that professional success is the main measure of a man's value (Courtenay, 2000). As a result, men who do not meet these expectations often experience low self-esteem, which can lead to depressive disorders and problems in family relationships (Jakubowska, 2015).

The pressure to achieve professional success also leads to excessive concentration on work, which often results in burnout and weakening of family ties. Studies show that men who do not have time for relationships with family and friends are more likely to experience loneliness and symptoms of depression (Plecka, 2018). Additionally, the traditional family model often makes it difficult for men to engage in home life. Those who try to combine a career with an active role as a father often encounter misunderstanding both in the workplace and in society (Jakubowska, 2015).

E. *Media and popular culture as a source of norms regarding masculinity*

Media and popular culture play a key role in shaping societal norms about masculinity. Depictions of men in movies, advertisements, and social media often promote the image of a strong, independent, and emotionally composed man. Such

messages can reinforce stereotypes and lead to the internalization of unrealistic expectations (Kimmel, 2008).

In addition, the media often glorifies violence as a means of resolving conflicts, which influences aggressive behavior among men. The stereotype of men as fearless heroes can cause feelings of inadequacy in those who do not meet this ideal. Studies show that men who are more exposed to content promoting traditional masculinity are more likely to experience problems with identity and self-esteem (Ricciardelli et al., 2010).

However, more and more media images of men are appearing, showing them in different social and emotional roles. Social campaigns such as " HeForShe " or mental health initiatives help to break stereotypes about masculinity, which promotes a more open approach to emotional problems.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL PRESSURE

A. Stress and burnout

Social pressure resulting from expectations regarding the role of a man as the main breadwinner in the family often leads to chronic stress. Men often experience the need to achieve professional success at the expense of their mental health. Long-term tension related to competition on the job market can result in burnout, which is manifested by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low self-esteem (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Studies indicate that men are less likely than women to seek professional help in crisis situations, which deepens the effects of chronic stress (Ojeda & Bergstresser, 2008).

B. Anxiety and Depression Disorders – The Problem of Masked Depression in Men

Social pressure to shape the image of a man as a strong and independent person can lead to masking emotions, including symptoms of depression. Masked depression in men often manifests itself through aggression, irritability or addictions, which makes it difficult to make a proper diagnosis (Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000). According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), men commit suicide much more often than women, which may be the result of undiagnosed mental disorders (WHO, 2022). In Poland, this problem is confirmed by statistics from the Police Headquarters, indicating a significant predominance of suicides among men (Police Headquarters, 2022).

C. Impact on interpersonal relationships – difficulties in building close bonds

Social norms of masculinity, which emphasize autonomy and emotional control, often make it difficult for men to form close relationships. Studies show that men are less likely than women to share their feelings, which leads to loneliness and difficulties in resolving interpersonal conflicts (Levant et al., 2006). Loneliness in relationships can lead to poorer quality of life, increased stress levels, and increased symptoms of depression. Many studies suggest that a lack of close relationships correlates with a higher risk of mood disorders, which further deepens social isolation (House et al., 1988). Building healthy relationships based on trust and openness is crucial for psychological well-being.

D. Coping mechanisms: problem avoidance, aggression, addictions

Faced with strong social pressures, many men resort to non-adaptive coping mechanisms. Avoiding problems through social isolation, aggression towards the environment or oneself, and addiction to psychoactive substances are the most common reactions to chronic stress (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Avoiding the problem can manifest itself through social withdrawal, spending excessive time on activities that distract from reality, such as computer games or social media. Aggression, in turn, is often a defense mechanism resulting from a sense of helplessness and frustration. Addictions, including alcoholism and substance abuse, are common as a form of escape from negative emotions (KBPN, 2021). Effective therapy should focus on breaking gender stereotypes, emotional education, and strengthening healthy strategies for coping with emotions.

IV. A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

A. How Clinical Psychology Diagnoses the Impact of Social Pressure on Mental Health

Clinical psychology plays a key role in diagnosing the impact of social pressure on mental health, especially in the context of men who struggle with expectations related to traditional gender roles. Clinical psychologists look at how social norms and values affect an individual's emotional and mental state, especially in the face of problems that are often related to imposed expectations. Diagnosis is based on a detailed clinical interview, in which coping mechanisms, the degree of adaptation to social roles and the way the patient interprets their problems related to external pressures are analyzed.

During the diagnosis, psychologists pay attention to factors such as anxiety, depression, burnout or interpersonal problems, which may result from unrealistic social expectations towards men. In this context, diagnostic tools such as questionnaires assessing the level of anxiety, depression and stress coping scales are often used. Clinical psychologists also look for symptoms of masked depression, which often appears in men as a result of socially stigmatized emotional expression. Mental health assessment tools such as the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1961) or the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (Hamilton, 1959) are also often used, which allow for a more precise assessment of symptoms related to anxiety and depression, which may be the result of social pressure.

In diagnostics, psychologists often use tools to analyze disorders related to gender norms, such as the Male Role Norms Inventory (Levant, 1992), which enable the identification of the extent to which the patient conforms to socially defined male roles, as well as how these roles affect his mental health.

B. Theoretical Models Explaining the Mechanisms of Social Stress

In clinical psychology, there are several theoretical models that help explain how social pressure affects mental health, especially in the context of men. One of the most important is the transactional stress model by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which defines stress as a process that occurs as a result of an individual's assessment of their ability to cope with the demands of a situation. The key to this model is the concept of "cognitive appraisal," or how an individual perceives the situation and the resources they have to cope with it. In the context of social pressure, men may perceive social demands as a stressful situation that they cannot cope with, especially if they perceive these demands as impossible to meet.

Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests that social expectations towards men – such as independence, strength, financial success and emotional control – lead to strong pressure on the individual. In societies where such a vision of masculinity is dominant, men may have difficulty expressing emotions and seeking help, which may lead to increased symptoms of depression, burnout or anxiety disorders.

Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness theory is also an important model explaining the mechanisms of social stress. In the context of men, the long-term pressure of not being able to meet social expectations can lead to feelings of helplessness and lack of control over one's life. According to this theory, individuals who experience chronic stress, including men forced to conform to rigid social roles, may begin to believe that their efforts are pointless, which leads to low mood, anxiety, and depression.

C. Barriers to Seeking Psychological Help – Why Are Men Less Likely to Seek Support?

Men, despite being increasingly aware of the importance of mental health, are still less likely to seek psychological help than women. There are many barriers that make it difficult for men to seek support. The first factor is the deeply rooted cultural stereotype of masculinity, which defines men as strong, independent, and able to solve problems on their own. Asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness, which makes it difficult for men to open up to psychological help (Mahalik et al.,2003). As a result, men may feel embarrassed to reveal their emotional problems, which results in ignoring or hiding them.

Studies also show that men have difficulty identifying and verbalizing their emotions, which makes it difficult to diagnose their mental health problems. This is often due to cultural issues, but also to their lower ability to cope with emotions compared to women (Levant et al., 2006). For this reason, men are less likely to seek help from specialists, and if they do, it is often delayed, when symptoms are already advanced.

Another barrier is the lack of knowledge about available psychological services, especially in smaller towns where psychological support may be less accessible. In Poland, there is still a limited number of psychologists who specialize in working with men, which means that men often feel misunderstood in psychotherapy offices, which are dominated by women (CBOS, 2021).

In response to these challenges, a key element is breaking stereotypes of masculinity and promoting men's mental health through emotional education and the development of accessible forms of psychological help that take into account the needs of this social group. In Poland, more and more organizations are taking action to promote men's mental health, such as depression prevention programs or mental health education in the workplace (Kaczmarek et al., 2020).

V. POSSIBLE SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

A. The importance of psychotherapy (CBT, ACT) in working with men

Psychotherapy is one of the most effective methods of supporting men struggling with the consequences of social pressures. Two particularly effective approaches for working with men are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Both of these methods can help men cope with stress, anxiety, depression, and issues related to gender norms.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is particularly effective for men who experience difficulties related to unrealistic social expectations. CBT is based on the premise that our thoughts influence our emotions and behaviors, so the goal of therapy is to identify and change negative thought patterns. Men who feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a "strong and independent" man can gain a better understanding of their thoughts and beliefs and learn more adaptive coping strategies through CBT (Beck, 1976). Therapy can also help overcome fears of weakness and allow emotions to be expressed in a constructive way.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) , on the other hand, focuses on accepting emotions that are an inevitable part of life, rather than suppressing them. For men who often feel obligated to hide their feelings, ACT can be very helpful. It teaches them how to acknowledge their emotions without judging them, and how to engage in meaningful activities that are consistent with their inner beliefs. ACT can support men in developing the ability to be open about their emotions while pursuing a path that is consistent with their values, rather than succumbing to the pressures of gender roles (Hayes et al., 2006).

B. The role of emotional education and changing the approach to masculinity in society

Emotional education is a key element in the process of breaking stereotypes related to masculinity, which lead to mental burdens in men. Modern society increasingly recognizes that the traditional image of a man - as an emotionally closed and independent person - is harmful and does not promote mental health. Therefore, changing the approach to masculinity, taking into account greater openness to emotions, is extremely important in the context of promoting mental health in men.

Emotional education, which begins in childhood, should

include learning to recognize, express, and regulate emotions. In Poland, more and more organizations, such as the Men in Life Foundation, are taking action to educate men emotionally, pointing to the need to change the traditional image of masculinity. Social campaigns, workshops, and educational meetings can help men understand that expressing their emotions, seeking help, or sharing their experiences does not mean being weak, but is an expression of courage and emotional maturity (Kwiatkowska & Piekarski, 2020).

Changing the approach to masculinity also involves recognizing that men, just like women, have the right to experience doubts, fears, or worries, and that seeking psychological support is a normal and healthy step in dealing with life's difficulties. Social campaigns for the acceptance of emotions, especially in men, can therefore be a foundation in reducing the stigma associated with mental health problems.

C. The importance of support groups and normalization of using psychological help

Support groups, both online and offline, are an important part of treating and preventing mental health problems in men. Participating in support groups allows men to share experiences and break the isolation they often feel when faced with emotional difficulties. These groups can offer a space where men can share their problems and coping strategies in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance.

In Poland, more and more men are starting to use support groups, such as programs that support men in solving problems related to depression, anxiety, or addictions. An example is the support group "Męska Strona", which helps men break stereotypes related to masculinity and supports them in the process of psychotherapy (Wiatr & Kaczmarek, 2019). Support groups help normalize the use of psychological help and break the taboo regarding male weakness.

Normalizing the use of psychological help also requires the involvement of media and public institutions in promoting men's mental health. Social campaigns that present men seeking help as heroes rather than weak people can help change social attitudes towards using therapy. Collaborative work between professionals, social organizations and the media is essential for men to feel safe reaching out for help and resolving their emotional problems.

VI. Summary

Social pressure exerted on men is a strong factor influencing their mental health. Social expectations, such as the need to meet traditional models of masculinity (strength, independence, avoiding showing weakness), can lead to serious emotional difficulties. Men often hide their mental problems, which results in anxiety disorders, depression, burnout and difficulties in building interpersonal relationships. Clinical psychology indicates mechanisms that lead to social stress and barriers that make it difficult for men to seek psychological help. At the same time, clinical psychologists point to the need to change the approach to masculinity, promoting more flexible patterns

in which the expression of emotions and seeking support are accepted. From the perspective of support, it is suggested that changes in the approach to masculinity are necessary and therapies such as CBT and ACT, which can help men cope with social pressure, should be promoted. It is also important to develop support groups and normalize the use of psychological help, which will contribute to improving their mental well-being.

The modern man has more and more opportunities to take care of his mental health. Compared to the past, access to psychological support and institutions that help in the development of mental health has increased significantly. More and more organizations, both public and private, offer support programs dedicated to men, including therapies aimed at the specific challenges they face. The number of educational programs that help men break stereotypes related to traditional social roles and promote healthy ways of coping with emotions and stress is also increasing.

Additionally, access to literature on men's mental health is becoming increasingly accessible. There are a number of books, articles, and other resources that focus on the challenges men face, offering them tools for personal growth and coping with emotional difficulties. All of this is a significant step towards changing the cultural norms in which men are encouraged to openly express their emotions and seek support during difficult times.

These changes, although slow, are a step towards improving men's mental health. It is important to continue to promote such initiatives, educate the public about the support options available and encourage men to actively use these resources. In this way, we can reduce the stigma associated with seeking help and improve the quality of life not only for men but for society as a whole.

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