

Why Women Make Men Anxious

Masculinity in our society is shot through with anxiety. Such anxiety is the breeding ground for the fear and resentment of women that lies in the unconscious minds of most men. In an attempt to squelch this anxiety, boys and later men aggressively devalue and seek to dominate women. They do so not out of some inherent misogyny, but in the service of psychological safety. And such a defensive reaction is reinforced every day by sexist and misogynistic cultural norms.

In the earliest years of child development, all children—boys and girls--must separate and individuate from their mothers. The road to autonomy is not always smooth, however. Boys attempt to navigate it by accentuating their

difference from their mothers. Since in our culture the primary mothering figure is almost always female, this means that boys consolidate their separate identities by assuming and emphasizing masculine traits that become markers for their difference from their mothers. Difference is the key.

Boys, then have the twin challenges of psychologically separating from their mothers AND consolidating a different gender identity. If fathers are available to help, boys identify with their paternal caretakers and this helps them in the development of their masculinity. If fathers are not available, then boys use other role models, models to be found in peer groups and in the media, to accomplish the same psychological task.

When a boy's psychic autonomy and his gender identity are based on accentuating the

opposite of femininity, the result is bound to be brittle and precarious. Masculinity becomes defined in the negative—it consists of what is not feminine. Thus, boys become allergic to behavior and personality traits that seem—or are deemed—to be weak or feminine. Such traits, like sensitivity, caretaking, or *communicating* need to be suppressed, beaten down or otherwise pushed away. It's important to remember that, for boys, being feminine or “not-masculine” creates not just gender anxieties, but threatens the boy's very sense of autonomy, his separate-ness if you will. This threat looms larger in the psyches of boys than girls.

Boys strive to feel separate from and superior to women because the distance that then results from devaluing femininity and women helps reassure them.

The problem arises when a boy feels sexual desire or love for a woman. And after all, most straight men, at least, will invariably find themselves in this situation since we are hard-wired to seek and form deep, secure, and pleasurable attachments with others. Such sought after and meaningful attachments always involve some degree of dependency and intimacy, don't they? But such feelings are dangerous for men. Think about-- it is in the very nature of forming loving and sexual attachments that ego boundaries ordinarily become less firm, more porous. Further, since attachments fulfill a deep need, dependency is inevitable, and dependency recreates the very conditions of childhood that boys struggled to overcome—namely their intimate dependency on their mothers.

So, just to review the problem here. Merging with—or getting too close to—a woman, poses an incipient threat to masculinity because it threatens the emotional distance that men spend their lives trying to establish. Further, depending on a woman threatens the superiority that men need to establish in order to protect their insecure or brittle egos.

Thus, an ordinary life that includes love, intimacy, and commitment creates anxiety for men. Women are anxious, too, about their femininity, of course, but their core identities are not at risk in the same way as are those of men. Instead, women are prone to feel shame and a sense of inferiority when their femininity is challenged. For men, it's a matter of psychological life or death.

Objectifying women is one solution that men unconsciously come up with to deal with the inherent risks attendant on intimacy. If the woman is a thing, she's less dangerous and if she can be used she can't be threatening. The man can come and go without worrying about the woman's reactions because she's been made 2 dimensional.

Shutting down is another solution. Men cut themselves off from women emotionally in order to maintain psychic distance. For men, emotional availability feels like lowering the drawbridge and letting the enemy cross the moat to plunder the castle. Other men may pose competitive threats and undue intimacy may rouse homosexual fears, but in general male friendships are safer.

Using this model, it's easy to see how feminism can be threatening to men—although there is a paradox here. To some degree, the

experience of strong women can be seen as relieving to some men because they—the men-- can come and go without guilt. On the other hand, a strong woman is someone the man can't control. A powerful woman can potentially impose her will much as the man's mother once did. Such women stir further anxiety in men.

Much of the objectionable behavior seen in men today stems from their defensive need to avoid facing their underlying problem—namely, their fear of women. It's not up to women to solve this problem. Educator and activist Warren Farrell put it well when he said:

“Men's greatest weakness is their facade of strength.”

Men need to drop this façade and overcome the terrors that it conceals.