

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Why So Many Young Men Are Lonely, Sexless, and Extremely Online

You may find this hard to believe, but 60 songs that explain the 90s, America's favorite poorly named music podcast is back with 30 more songs than 120 songs total. I'm your host Rob Harvilla, here to bring you more shrewd musical analysis, poignant nostalgic reveries, crude personal anecdotes, and rad special guests, all with even less restraint than usual. Join us once more on 60 songs that explain the 90s every Wednesday on Spotify.

Today's episode is about the state of men in America. Last week, I came across a document, a new report by the non-profit institute called Equamanda. This report was called The State of American Men 2023. It kicks off with this, quote,

Many men, especially younger men, are socially disconnected, pessimistic about the future, and turning to online anger. They are facing higher rates of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and a sense of isolation as seen in the agreement of 65% that no one really knows me well.

End quote. That is just one of several observations about young men from this report that absolutely stopped me cold. Here's some more. 30% of young men say that in a typical week, they don't hang out with anybody outside their house. 60% of young men say they watch porn every week. Put those together, that means that in any given week, young men today are roughly as likely to watch porn as to see a friend they don't live with. Among men with a high school education or less, one in six report having no social activities whatsoever. Given that young men today spend so much time on their own, it follows perhaps that they don't extend much trust to public institutions, whether it's colleges, companies, government. Fewer than 30% of young men say today that they trust President Joe Biden. And while there are definitely signs of a subtle reactionary turn, a rightward turn among younger men, even fewer young men in America today say they trust ex-president Donald Trump. Now, one survey is one survey. It doesn't do us a lot of good to overreact

and proclaim that one set of findings is like the new iron law of how things are in America. It's just one set of findings. But this report is in line with other polls and the analysis of experts like Richard Reeves, the Brookings scholar who is the author of the excellent book of Boys and Men, and Richard is today's return guest. We talk about how complaining about masculinity is maybe history's oldest trope, why this time might be a little bit different, what young men think about feminism, the effect of social media on boys and why it might be very different than the effect of social media on girls, and finally, what a positive vision of masculinity in America might look like. I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English.

Richard Reeves, welcome back to the show. Thank you for having me back on, Derek. This is great. Well, before we get to this report that I talked about in my open, I think it'd be useful for people who did not get a chance to listen to our last conversation to hear a quick summary of what your excellent, excellent book is about, because the idea that modernity has destroyed masculinity is a very old one. It is hundreds of years old, and this is a popular idea that often goes for a walk and leaves evidence and data behind. Your book, however, is full of evidence. It is full of data. It is full of very specific claims about what exactly is the matter with boys and men in America, and to a certain extent in the Western world as you see it. Can you quickly remind us what it is that you're talking about? Right. Well, the first thing is just to underline your point that the crisis of masculinity is probably about as old as men. As far as I can tell, we've been talking about how masculinity is being undermined throughout human history. For at least as long as old people have been complaining about young

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people today, it is a pretty common refrain. Even just in more recent history, I found this essay by Arthur Schlesinger in 1958. It was called The Crisis of Masculinity, again, a squire. It was all about the rise of the women's movement. There was before Vietnam, after Vietnam. There was Arthur Miller's death of a salesman. There was the organization. I mean, this is just even in the last few decades. It's been a constant refrain. The difference now is that there's data. To the extent that there's always been a discussion of is masculinity in crisis, which, by the way, I think is an important data point in itself. I could suggest that the social construction of masculinity has always been on people's minds for good reason. Really, when you looked at the data, it's like, well, what crisis? But now what you see is boys and men long way behind in education. You've written about this, Derek, but there's a bigger gender gap on college campuses today in favor of women than there was in favor of men 50 years ago when Title IX was passed for a 16 to an 18-point gap, depending on how you measure it. It's just this huge, huge gender gap in education. In the labor market, it's not a secret that working-class men especially, and in the US especially, but just generally, we've seen stagnant wages, falling employment, falling labor force participation, lots of fathers out of their children's lives. We see a number of men who are just not in touch with their kids anymore. I think some of that then plays out again, you will know this, and certainly your listeners will know the literal deaths of despair from suicide, from drug overdose, alcohol, and that's overwhelmingly men. It's like at least two-thirds, probably three-quarters of those deaths of despair of men. Even just recently, this data may even come out since we last spoke, but a rise in suicide rates among young men. Among 15 to 24-year-old men rose by 8% just between 2020 and 2021, and overall, a four times higher risk of suicide among men than among women. You see in different ways these kind of this male malaise, whatever you want to call it, playing out, but what I'm at pains to do is to just, where's the data? Here are some trends. Is this a problem? If so, what do we do about it? And in the sense to sort of ground it in data and in facts, rather than, as you suggested, this sort of cultural confection around masculinity, which is always with us. Why do you think it is useful to talk about this as a male problem? Because someone could say, deaths of despair are an American problem, or it's a drug problem. They could say suicide is a gun supply problem. They could say that the fact that men are falling behind in education is an education problem, but you sew all of these ideas together and you say, we might be looking at something that you would characterize as a male problem. How do you find it helpful to frame it that way? Well, I think that inevitably, anybody that comes at a data set of any kind brings their own priors with them. And so there's always this danger. You've just listed a bunch of things that it could be a problem, but they might have lent a little bit left. I'm not sure. We'd have to go back over the list, but I encounter a lot of people who say it's a marriage problem. If more people were married, their kids would do better. They'd have more employment. They'd be healthier. They'd live longer, etc. Or it's a X problem. So you always plant your... The causal arrow always starts where your normative prior is, generally speaking, right? And usually you can find some evidence for that, but it's obviously very complicated and multi-causal. These things overlap with each other and usually affect each other. And the reason I think it's

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still useful in many of the areas that we just discussed, to talk about what's happening to boys or to men, is because, on average, but with pretty different sizes between the groups, these are problems that do seem to disproportionately affect boys and men. So, for example, I think it makes sense to look at black men in the context of incarceration. It seems to be sensible to look at working-class men when it comes to employment and so on. And so I hope, and I would say this wouldn't I, but I hope I'm being led by the data to conclude that the category of male is doing some work for us here. And not least, when we turn to things like the evaluation of policies. So one of the things I look at is which policies work for which people. And it turns out some policies work really well for women and girls, especially in education, but they're just not moving the needle for boys and men. I think it's good to know that, just from the point of view of kind of making policy, in the same way that I would say it's useful to measure the gender pay gap in the other direction. Is it still useful to know that women on average earn less than men, even as you see this huge rise in women's earnings? I would say it is. Now, you might say that's not a women problem. That's a labor market problem. And yeah, it is, but it's the way the labor market's interacting with women's life trajectories that's causing a gender pay gap. So let's go to this report. The state of American men 2023. There are so many places to begin, but I want to start with the issue of loneliness. So just a few weeks ago, the Surgeon General of the US called loneliness a new American epidemic. And I'm not 100% sure how I feel about calling sociological phenomena epidemics, but leaving that aside, the rise of loneliness is a statistical fact. We can see it from surveys. We can see it from polls, including this report. And this report finds that two thirds of young men today, two thirds of men under the age of 45 feel like, quote, no one really knows them. Two in three young men feeling like no one really knows them. Why do you think more young men today feel unseen by friends and perhaps even by society as well? Well, I think it starts with that friend point, which is this close contact around certain relationships. And so that number really jumped out at me as well. It's consistent with other evidence around what Daniel Cox at AI calls the friendship recession. But he finds in his work, the family service, he runs out of AI that 15% of young men say that they don't have a close friend. They think that's 18 to 30. You need to double check the precise age range on that. But it's not exactly the same age range. And that's up from 3% in 1990 and much higher for men than for women. And most of the work on social isolation changes in friendship, not just for young men, but also middle-aged men just shows that the risk of social isolation is just higher for men than it is for women for reasons that we can get into. But partly, I think because the institutions that support male friendship are probably atrophy to some extent. So more isolation for young men for sure. And then there's this broader sense in the culture, which is like no one really knows me. I think that's related to the idea of not being seen. I think there's a lot of young men who will, and Peggy Orenstein found this in her book on boys and sex, who can give a long list of things that they know they're not supposed to do. Long list of don'ts, but not really any do's, not really like what it's good for you to do. Not many sense of what's important or valuable about you. I think the danger in the current culture is that there's too many young men who don't feel seen, don't feel heard, don't feel listened to, who feel like their problems are not getting due attention. And that creates all kinds of downstream effects that we might get to in terms of their mental health and politics,

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et cetera. So that's the data point that we have to take very seriously. It's important to say that it's not just across the range, it's going up for younger men. But male isolation is not a trifling matter, culturally speaking. One thing I find very interesting when you look at the effects that online life is having, and here I am going to do the thing where I split it by gender, is that it seems like anxiety is rising fastest among young women, but social isolation is rising faster for young men. In fact, according to this survey, nearly half of men, 48% say their online lives are more engaging and more rewarding than their offline lives. And that is remarkable. So you have this interesting schism or disproportionate effect by gender, more anxiety for young women as they spend time online, more social isolation for men. I'll double click on your offer to go deeper there. Why do you think it's having this specific effect for men? Why do you think social isolation in particular has been rising so much for young guys in America?

Well, first of all, the way the questions frame is compared to your online life. So there's a issue there, which is as your online relationships atrophy, then relatively speaking, your online relationships might become more valuable than your in real life life, if you like. So there's something that might be shifting there just about the relative ratios. That said, I think you're onto something because my sense of this is the ways in which boys and girls and young men and young women are online differ non-trivially. And that for girls and young women, it's more around social connections. So they're more likely on Instagram, TikTok, etc. Boys are more likely to be gaming. And so I think for girls, there is a sense of this is relational anxiety, how many likes you get, how many clicks you get. The mean girls phenomenon goes online in a frictionless way. And so this kind of relational aspect, so Gene Twengey and Jonathan Hyatt and others would talk about the fact that girls relationally bully each other, whereas boys are more likely to physically bully each other. Now, those social media landscapes are basically primed for relational forms of kind of bullying ostracism, who's my best friend inside or outside of stuff. Whereas the way in which men are consuming online, it is much more about video gaming. It is much more of that kind of interaction. And I got to tell you, having watched, I've raised three boys who are in their 20s now, especially through the pandemic. One of the first things my youngest son and his friends did was buy a Minecraft server. When the pandemic hit, they literally chipped in together, we've got a Minecraft server. And during the course of the day, they'd go on there, they'd build stuff, they'd chat and so on too. I've got another one who was actually very into esports. Some of his best friends in the world, he's made through esports, have now become in real life friends as well. So I do think there's something to be said for the different ways in which technology can play out. And maybe we should be thanking the stars for the introduction of video gaming into men's lives, given that so many other opportunities for friendships seem to have declined. So rather than lamenting that, maybe we should be celebrating it.

That's a very interesting take. I want to connect what you just said to two other shows that we've recently done and ask for your take on them as well. One show is about youth anxiety. And my big thesis about youth anxiety, actually, we've done a lot of shows on this subject, is that it's not just about the dosage effect of smartphones and social media and screen time. It's also about the opportunity cost that if teenagers and 20-somethings are spending seven hours a day on their phone, well, the amount of hours of conscious waking life hasn't changed. It's still 16. And so that's seven hours you're not spending in the physical world with friends, dating people, hanging out, having sex. All of those things, by the way, are declining

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among teenagers today. They're partying less, they are dating less, they're having sex less. So one aspect of this is that the internet seems to offer this inferior good, this inferior simulation of offline life. And among girls, it's more likely to accentuate social judgment that they would get in the physical world, and that can contribute to higher anxiety. And for men, by replacing being with people, with being alone, despite the fact that sometimes you can, I do believe, I do think you're right, that you can have fulfilling relationships with someone that you game with a lot. I think that's possible, but I think for a lot of people, by taking them out of the world and keeping them in their rooms, it reduces offline relationships and makes them feel more lonely. The second point this connects to is we just had an episode about the decline in youth sports. Fewer young people are playing youth sports, fewer young people, excuse me, high school teenagers are playing sports in high school. That decline is particularly sharp for men, for young boys, I should say. Young boys are playing football a lot less, they're playing basketball less, they're playing baseball less, basically they're playing every single sport less except for golf. And I should say that golf is not necessarily a sport of loneliness, but among the more isolated and lonely sports. That's the only one that's growing. I wish I had a question here, I'm just sort of serving you up a couple theories from you to pick from. But when you put it all together, it does seem to me like we have a relatively comprehensive theory here that we have more time being spent on screens, which is leading to a sense of loneliness or a sense of disconnection. And we are seeing the effects in the physical world with, for example, the decline in youth sports. And all of that together just doesn't seem to me to be a recipe for people feeling connected with their world, connected with friends or seen by their community. Yeah, okay, you're right, there is a lot there. So the first thing is just to, I think, underline the attack on golf. I'm going to subscribe to Oscar Wilde's view. I'm pretty sure it's Oscar Wilde who said that golf is just a good walk spoiled. Yeah, I agree with that. I agree with that. So I see it as an absolutely bad thing. If young men are playing more golf, then we're in more trouble than I thought we were. But I think there's a couple of things. One is, so this point about displacement and opportunity cost I think is absolutely right, especially for boys. So my view about the time spent online is there's two things. One is the amount of time spent online is just time spent not doing something else. So there's the opportunity cost effect. And I think that for boys, that is a bigger problem. So it's not that I don't think gaming can't be a good thing, say, but that you can have too much of a good thing. And it could displace other activities such as sports, such as in real life stuff. So again, I think weirdly, I think this means the sort of screen time issue might apply more appropriately to boys than to girls. Whereas for girls, it's what are you doing on the screen as much as how much time are you spending on the screen? So if you're spending your time, as my sons have done playing Rainbow Six Siege or Far Cry, which I played with friends that my son and my friend back in the UK, etc. And you do that for an hour or two, and it's great. And then you go out and do something else. I think it's really hard to say that that's a problem. And it couldn't in some ways be a good thing. But if you're doing that eight hours, it's the only thing you're doing problem. But for girls, they're on Instagram, they're on TikTok, they're kind of watching the lights, etc. So, so interesting, there is this debate right now, is it screen time? Or is it what you're spending on the screen? Let me say that again. There is this debate right now, which is almost the difference between how much time you're

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spending on screen versus what are you spending your time doing on screen. And it might well be that that breaks differently on average by gender. And that for girls, you do have to be more attentive to what is it you're doing online, less Instagram, please, less TikTok, please. But with boys, you've just got to be like, okay, fine, I know you haven't fun gaming, but five hours is enough out you go. And I do think that relates to this decline in sports more generally. That's obviously a problem in itself for all kinds of reasons. But I suspect you may have got into this in your previous episode, which I missed, and it's very unlikely to miss. And I'll definitely go back to it because honestly, it's always amazing, Derek. Is there's a class gap, right? You probably got into that, which is as much as there's a gender gap is much less true for those who have less money. And one reason for that is because schools are able to do it less. So after school activities. And here, I'm going to bridge it to what you might think of as a completely unrelated obsession of mine, which is male teachers. It turns out that male teachers are much more likely to be after school coaches than female teachers are. Everything else equal for all kinds of reasons we might want to get into. So the lack of male teachers in the classroom also leads to a lack of male coaches on the playing field. So there's a double effect. And honestly, if you were to force me right now to say, which of those effects is bigger, I'm not sure I'd know the answer, right? Because the loss of that kind of, and I just think about me again, the end of one stuff, but like, I had teachers who were like mediocre in the classroom at best, but by God, they got us out to do whatever the hell it was, play rugby badly, sail badly, ski badly, whatever the hell it was. But actually, I remember those male teachers much more strongly for what happened on the playing field than I did in the classroom. And so you can't, I can't have it. I don't have any proof of this, this position right now. But I think this all speaks to the loss of coaching, the loss of those spaces within which boys in particular can do their thing as well as girls in their own space. But I do think it's particularly affecting boys right now. Let's talk about work. Let's talk about labor right now. You've pointed out in your research that there are a couple fields that are becoming significantly more polarized by gender. The share of psychologists who are male has fallen from 60% in 1980 to about 20% today. The share of social workers and elementary school teachers has fallen by, who are men, has fallen by about half in the last 40 years as well from about 40% to 20% male in those fields. Now I can imagine someone might say, who cares? It doesn't matter. Some professions have more men, some professions have more women. That's just how life goes. And in a world where people are doing what they want to do, we shouldn't go deaf con one every single time you learn that men and women have different preferences. I think I remember Olga Kazan, a writer for the Atlantic, pointing out that even in Scandinavian societies, there's some evidence that the STEM fields are even more polarized male to female than they are in America. So maybe this sort of labor market gender polarization doesn't matter. But you've pointed out right here, one way in which it might matter in education, which is essentially mentorship. We've had Raj Chetty on the program talking about how mentors are really, really important for both men and women, that father figures and men help them stay in school, help them graduate from school, help to continue with that sequence. And for women, mentorship can also be really important because if a woman doesn't have a lot of mentors who are business leaders in her life, and then she gets a mentor who shows that, yes, women can be successful CEOs, that's really

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powerful. Why else do you think it matters that these professions are polarizing by gender? Why does it matter that there are some fields that are becoming significantly less male?

Well, at the first, I think it's just this role model sense of just you get a vicious circle whereby if you don't see men in those sorts of roles growing up, then you're less likely to see them as roles for you, which could spill over into other areas. Like, you know, if you don't see any men in caring professions, for example, or even in teaching professions, is it harder then to grow up thinking that being a stay-at-home dad might not be the right sort of thing to do, to be a literature carer and educate for your own kids? Yeah, I think that's right because they think it bleeds over into general kind of gender norms. So one of the great lines in the women's movement was you can't be it if you can't see it. And that is not just a narrow occupational point. It's a broad, is this a domain in which men do stuff? So I think it matters that reason.

The second reason I think it really matters is because to the extent that the problems in education, the problems in mental health, the problems that boys and girls and young men, all men and all women are having, to the extent that they're different, but let's assume they're equal. Let's assume that everything else equal, we're all going to struggle, whether we're male or female, not having providers of your own sex could be a problem. So just getting men, like there's this whole thing, oh, men won't go to therapy. There's all these memes, aren't there, which is like the 19 things men will do before they go to therapy.

So it's a meme, but it's like, well, okay, it does look as if it's a little bit harder for whatever reason to persuade men that kind of counseling is for them. But how much harder still, if the profession is almost entirely female, maybe it would be easier for them if they could see men doing it. And maybe, and this applies to psychology, social work and teaching, maybe there's a slightly different way of doing therapy, or teaching in the classroom, or interacting with the father in the house, it's a social worker that will be a little bit more sensitive to the male and female ways of being in the world. That's certainly the lesson the other way around. That's certainly what we've learned from the importance of female role models and female mentors for women. So it's implausible to think that it wouldn't, at least to some extent, apply the other way around, which is to say, look, yeah, we know how we do this to put a sort of anecdote to this as this kind of rise of so-called kind of, you probably know this, but kind of walking, talking therapy, which is like, when you're doing therapy with a guy, don't sit down opposite him and stare him in the face, because men are a little bit more shoulder to shoulder in their communication style, women are a bit more face to face, to the extent that that's true, the standard stare each other in the face form of therapy might be less effective for men than walking. And so I know this guy who mentors and volunteers in a local school, and he said, he goes in there and he asks, which boy are you having the most trouble with? He says, I take him for a walk. Not take him for a coffee, take him for a walk. And no one had trained him. I told him the shoulder to shoulder thing. I said, oh, it's interesting because men do communicate a bit more shoulder to shoulder. That's why we fish. Maybe that's why we golf, Derek. Maybe golf gets his way back into the conversation, but golfing, fishing, whatever it is, we're doing something else, shoulder to shoulder, and then we talk. And I think that's, it's true on average, lots of caveats. So maybe actually rather than trying to train women how men communicate or, as we used to, train men, male on how females communicate, we used to train male psychologists on how do women think? Well, we don't want to have to end up treating female psychologists

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how do men think? Let's just have a decent share of men and women in all those professions. Is that too much to ask for? I don't think so, but we're not doing anything about it right now. That's really interesting. It makes me wonder, and this might be a totally frivolous thought that has no basis in fact, whether- It is a totally frivolous thought that has no basis in fact. This is quite a bit, let me just say that up front. This is a frivolous thought that has no basis in fact. It's a thought bubble that occurred to me and I expect you to puncture it. I wonder whether men's social life has to be more multitasking than women's social life, which is to say you mentioned in narrowly in the field of therapy, it has been found by some people that men can't just sit and talk. And this is a painting with a broad brush here, right? Broad distribution of men who have the capacity to sit and talk, but men in general are less good at just sitting and talking. They need a walk. You already mentioned that one thing that men do online to be social is to play video games. And so the sociality is mediated by the video game itself. What is golf? Well, golf is hanging out with friends. You're hanging out, but you're playing a sport. So the playing of golf is a pretext for the social hangout. You could add watching a sports game in bars with friends, with male friends. You can add, you know, watching sports and television with male friends. It's possible that, of course, you know, women, I'm using weirdly officious terms here, but like, you know, mediate their social hangouts as well, right? Women go shopping maybe disproportionately more than men do. Women do activities, and certainly not suggesting that they don't. But some way that you just phrased that made me wonder whether there might be some sociologists out there who can, you know, jump into this conversation from the ether and say, yes, in fact, men do need their social activities to be more mediated by a kind of multitasking than women. I don't know. There's the thought bubble. Feel free to puncture it. Well, I would love to puncture it, but unfortunately, I think it's true. The difficulty is substantiating it and then saying how far it comes naturally and how far it's socialized, right? So I think it's just descriptively true. And it's interesting to see how many of the movements to try and help men are based around an activity, right? There's this kind of, you know, the shed movement, the men's sheds movement, whether you're going to get men together in workshops, came out of Australia, et cetera, right? Same sort of principle, like the walking, talking therapy and so on. And all the examples you just gave of it being mediated, I think it's just seems descriptively true. Now, maybe it's socialized, maybe it's not. And it also seems true that that's less true of women, that they are just able to do it more directly, right? And again, this is not perhaps the most perfect experiment, but walking to a coffee shop is full of women staring at each other. And it's just, again, it's like, there are some men staring at each other, of course, but just that whole sit down stare at each other thing. So descriptively, it seems to mean to be true. Not recognizing that and just saying, if that's true, it's not the one is better than the other, right? We shouldn't roll our eyes and say, oh, well, men, they can't even talk to each other unless they're pretending to play baseball or fish or whatever it is. What's wrong with them? What's wrong with them, right? If only they were more like, oh, nor should we say, like, what is it about women? Why can't they do something useful with themselves while they're chatting, right? Why do they just sit and stare at each other for hours on end or sit on the phone for hours? What's wrong with them, right? And the answer is like, not right either. And the distribution is overlap and so on. But if we believe that there are some differences in things like communication style, learning style, you know, just the way of being in the world style

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between men and women, it's insane not to try and have some diversity of provider in both directions, especially in kind of critical field. I don't care about deep sea fishing. Deep sea fishing is overwhelmingly male. And as a colleague, a female colleague of mine said in a discussion about occupational segregation, she says, yeah, yeah, you can have that one. We don't want that one. Take these evasions. And honestly, I'll be clear. I don't care what the gender split on deep sea fishing is really, as long as there's no obstacles to it. I don't even really care too much about the norm around it being quite masculine, right? And maybe I'll get in trouble for saying this, but I don't really... That's not a profession where as a policymaker, I think that we have a public interest in worrying if it's, say, 97% male. But I think we have a strong public interest in worrying about our legislators, our CEOs, our scientists, our entrepreneurs, all of which are massively skewed towards male, but also our early years educators, our social workers, our psychologists, our coaches, et cetera, that's overwhelmingly skewed towards female. I think in all of those cases, there is a public interest in acting to ensure that they don't become homogeneously one sex or another. I want to get back to the point and talk about its findings about young men's attitudes toward women, which I found frustrating and also messy. And I would love your brain on this. So the report found that essentially more than half of men, young men today, say that in America, men have it harder than women. More than half of young men say that. Roughly half of young men say that, quote, feminism has made America a better place, which means that roughly half of men don't think that, quote, feminism has made America a better place. There are other parts in the report that suggest that while young men might be more likely than older men to respond negatively to the word feminism, a lot of them still take on the actions of allyship at work on behalf of female friends. So I'd love you to help me unpack this idea of this apparent turn against feminism among young men that this report identified. Yeah, so it jumped out to me as well. And it's also striking that if anything, slightly fewer younger men are likely to say feminism's made America a better place. Now, I don't want to overstate it, but the report shows that elder millennials, which is 38 to 45, it was 56%, just a bit over half said feminism's made America a better place, whereas it was 47% of men aged 18 to 23. Now, again, that's not a big enough change to be sure about, but it means anything. But if anything, you'd hope it was going the other way, right? I mean, your prior would be you'd expect younger men. But the simplistic sort of cable news chiron here would be feminism is least popular among the youngest men, or feminism is getting less popular as men get among the youngest generation, which is the kind of thing that you could imagine both in MSNBC and a Fox News really screaming about, right? Yes. And I think it's worth saying that there are other surveys, including from the UK and the US, that without asking exactly the same questions pointing in a similar direction, which is this slight move against the idea of feminism among younger men. And this is the surveys just men, but in other surveys that include women can be true of young women too. So one thing we have to consider is that just means that the word itself just is meaning something different over time. And so what does feminism mean to my dad versus kind of me versus my sons, right? And I think it's perfectly plausible, my dad who's like, is he a feminist? I've never actually asked it, but I'm pretty sure it's a yes, because he's like, well, of course, just means equality, right? And me, I'd probably be sort of in a similar place. But I think for a lot of people, they don't think that's what feminism is anymore.

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They think feminism is something else, I think it's a cultural movement, which is driven by an attack on patriarchy, misogyny, etc. They associate it with terms like toxic masculinity. They basically think, and there's some survey evidence to support this, that feminism is anti men, right? It's not just pro women, it's become anti men.

Now, true or false, that is I think the impression that a lot of people have been given.

And I think it's a problem that this zero sum framing has come to kind of dominate the way people kind of think about it. And it fits with like men saying, you said men say it's harder to be a man and so on. So I think it's just this kind of sense of like, there are these loud voices on behalf of women and saying it's a patriarchy, toxic masculinity, mansplaining, etc. And the only voices they hear, and this is in the report as well, they're talking about men, are misogynist ones, blaming feminism. That's kind of the trap, but that's the cultural trap that we're in right now and it'll be desperately to get out though, I think. And there's one really interesting wrinkle to this cultural trap, which I think you described quite well, which is that this survey, the authors of which I do not take for conservatives, nonetheless found that there is a strong association between young men who embrace a kind of traditional, even reactionary form of masculinity, and young men who say they feel a strong purpose. That is to say, it seems to be very conservative young men, anti feminist young men, who self report having a very the strongest sense of purpose, while it is the more progressive young men who tend to be more in favor of what we are calling feminism, who say they feel the least amount of purpose. How did you make sense of that finding? Yeah, well, again, some of the devils in the details, which is like what's being defined as sort of traditional masculinity in the survey. And you're right that those who subscribe to more traditionally kind of masculine, old fashioned views, some of them you might say it's misogynist. First of all, it's worth saying that actually, the younger men are less likely to subscribe to that than the slightly older men in the sample. So those lines are going the right way. So again, it's slight contradiction to the feminist finding. When you ask, if you ask men questions like, you know, men are supposed to know where their girlfriend is all the time, men make better business executives than women do, a gay guy is not a real man, all those sorts of questions that are in the survey, actually improvement from at least from a kind of progressive almost all of those numbers, right? So the same men who are more likely, if anything, to be anti feminist are also the ones who are taking what you probably consider to be least likely rather to take the anti feminist view. So back to your earlier point, it's confusing. And it's just really capturing a lot of kind of cultural stuff. But nonetheless, to the to the credit of the report authors, they do point out that the men who are subscribing to these quite traditional views of masculinity do report having the most sense of purpose in life. Now, the way I interpret that is having a very traditional view about men's role in life, and women's role in life and what you're supposed to do gives you a sense of purpose. But that shouldn't be surprising to me. That was that was part of its strength in kind of historic, like men knew what they were supposed to do, women knew what they were supposed to do. And if you did those things, you were meeting your

purpose, right? And it gave you a path that gave you a script, it gave you a journey like here's your path, go do this, right? And this is how you're going to relate to women, etc. The trouble is, it was kind of deeply unequal, relied on the economic dependency and to some extent the oppression of women, which still appears to be true in this survey. Then the question is absent

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that what gives men purpose? Do we want them to have purpose? And if their purpose is no longer going to be supplied by these traditional views, which we presumably by and large don't want it to be, what's the alternative? And our failure to answer that question is what's driving I think a lot of these other is a driving a lot of these other trends and our continued failure to provide a male specific script, a sense of purpose to young men that is distinctly appealing to them as men, not as defective women, but as men, leaves the door open to finding purpose in these much more traditional or even in some cases misogynist views. So that's again, I think that's the real position we found ourselves in. And we're in this horrible moment of transition, where we're just really struggling to make sense of like, what does it mean to be a man today? Like, how can I have what's driving me? What's my script, etc. And so I see this as a really, really big pain point. I also see that the real danger is that absent a really strong cultural script for men that is compatible with gender equality, too many men will conclude that the only way to have a strong script for masculinity is to be against gender equality. This might be slightly controversial, but I do think that one way masculinity is often defined is in relation to women. That's heteronormative, because obviously gay men can be very masculine as well. But I say that to introduce one more fact from this report, which is the decline of relationships and the decline of sex among this young male group. Because it would be one thing if this turn against feminism or this turn toward reactionary masculinity or however you want to call it was happening in an environment where there were no changes to the norms in relationships and sexual relationships between young men and young women or other men. But instead, we have an environment where younger men today are significantly more likely to be single, have fewer sexual partners than they used to, and are more likely to be sexless than they used to. Overall, in this study, the majority could not say they were in a stable relationship that satisfied them. And this is a study that goes up to men in their mid 40s. How much do you think this sort of decline in romantic relationships is playing a role in the disorientation that you're speaking to? It's really difficult here to separate out cause and effect that I don't think one ever could. It's impossible to imagine a study that would allow you to kind of randomly put men into relationships and see what happened to their sense of selves or vice versa. My view is that this part of a broader pattern, and the pattern as I see it, is based on the presumption that mature masculinity is socially constructed by and large. I would say, again, risk and controversy more so than mature femininity. That has always been true, that boys don't become men automatically. It's the task of a culture to socially construct what it means to be a man. And that is constructed in institutions, through relationships, through scripts, through stories, through role models, through various pathways, through certain... That's... It happens. It's a job. It's a task. It's a task that we face. And I do think that, to some extent, that creation, that social construction of mature masculinity has happened in the context of family relationships. It's happened in the context of female relationships. It's happened in the context of family. It's certainly happened in the context of becoming a father. So, I think fatherhood plays a central role in constructing masculinity. That's all true. The reason why it's a very difficult subject, when you get into the relationship with women being part of it, is that it can very often sound as if, and some conservatives are on their side to say this, it's the job of women to civilize men. And if women don't civilize men, they'll be savages. Now, it turns out that in the era of internet pornography and gaming and

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basements, actually, they're not savages. They're much more likely to check out than act out with obvious exceptions. But nonetheless, the difficult thing here might be that women do have a role to play in the institutional systems within which mature masculinity is created. But the last thing anybody wants to do is to be seen to be saying to women, Oi, do you mind now that you've finished with the women's movement? I mean, you've got a few bit mopping up to do, but now that you've sorted yourselves out, would you mind coming over here and fixing the men as well? That's not a very

appealing thing, right? I think if we tried that out on our respected partners and friends, they'd be like, are you kidding me? And so we want to avoid that sense. But I don't think we can avoid the hard truth that it is a work. It's a work in progress. And the absence of relationships for men is certainly adding to that lack of purpose. So it's not quite, it's not as simple as the conservative way of saying to women and children, give men purpose, right? And so absent now, of course, they lack purpose. But that's obviously reductionist. That's obviously not going to be a good message now. But I think the opposite message, which is that men can create, we can socially construct a mature masculinity, absent relationships with women, like the men going their own way movement. That does not fill me with gladness, the idea that there are kind of men's basically the male separatist movement, the equivalent of you are saying, yeah, we're just going to do that women. And they have all these, if you've seen, if you've been in this part of the manosphere, but they have different levels of detaching themselves from society. And basically, like it's stewing women all together, like we're not going to do women out of anger and frustration and so on too. But I don't think men going their own way are going to do great, is my honest view. And that's more true of men going their own way than women going their own way.

And that's a very, very uncomfortable thing to say. But I can't help but feel that it's true. I really like the way that you framed that, because while I don't consider myself exactly PhD level in terms of my understanding of the manosphere, as it is sometimes called, I barely know who Andrew Tate is, although I've read sort of New York Times articles about him, which might not be the best way to discover who Andrew Tate is. It's like reading TMZ to figure out who a public intellectual is or something. I do feel like there is a certain theory of masculinity that is about masculinity as independent strength as separated from the group. You can be an island, you can be stoic, you can go off to the woods and chop the wood and start your fire and be a man alone and discover a kind of core masculinity inside of you that only takes one person to discover. That's a kind of very explicitly, if not lonely theory of masculinity and a lone theory of masculinity, that in a way you almost have to depart from society in order to discover that kind of masculine essence. But you're proposing something which is sort of the, this is too academic, but like the relational theory of masculinity, that masculinity is the ability to be a strong and loving partner. It's the ability to be a strong and loving friend. It's the ability to be a strong and loving leader of people, not just leader of men, but leader of people, leader of women if you're coaching a girl soccer team, leader of people. And I like that that definition puts, it defines strength in terms of the positive effect it has on other people and not just the kind of proto-stoic sense that you're in control of yourself. You have disciplined yourself and therefore you are a good and true man. That seems like an impoverished definition of what at least my side, sort of center-lefty progressives,

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can hope modern masculinity can be. Yeah, I think I like the way you've done that. It makes me realize, I think more clearly than I had before, that this lone ranger ideal of masculinity. It's profoundly unhelpful and anthropologically wrong. Now we can then get to the kind of debate about why is it calm? Why does it happen? Of course, because historically, of course, like being on your own was like the worst thing to do. I mean, actually, the surgeon general talks a lot about this. Being alone meant death in pre-modern societies. So we could talk about why that's happened, but I actually really like the definitions from people. David Gilmore is an anthropologist who talks about men generating a surplus. They create more than they need for their own survival. That then gets distributed to groups, families, kins, tribes, whatever. That obviously varies hugely by a cultural context. That defines it. The generation of a surplus is intrinsically and inescapably relational. The recent social science evidence on what happens to men after divorce, the risk of isolation for men, the importance that men put on marriage. More men now say that being married is important to them than women do. And so this whole idea of the ball and chain, that myth-making around it, it must be doing some work for us or it must have once done some work for us, which is you should get someone who knows what they're talking about to talk about that. But all I'm telling you is that it's basically wrong and that if anything, masculinity is at least as relationally defined in this sort of cultural and social context, maybe it's femininity. Now, of course, I'm thinking about motherhood and I'm thinking about the relationship between mothers and children, which is somewhat different, etc. But nonetheless, I'm going to basically stand by that view that it is, as you put it very nicely, that we've now got a dichotomy here you could write a piece about, which is a lone range of masculinity versus relational masculinity or whatever you want to call it. I don't know if it's Mr. Rogers or whatever, whatever, I find it. Because I do think that the social science is on the side of masculinity is socially constructed. Therefore, it needs relationships. Therefore, the absence of relationships is particularly damaging to the male sense of self. And that's what's playing out right now. I love that enough that I think it's a good place to land. I love the dichotomy of lone ranger masculinity versus relational masculinity or surplus masculinity. That's a concept that I'm thinking about a lot these days on book leave. And I think that's a lovely place to end. Richard, thank you so much for doing this. Oh, as always, loved it. Every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great week. you