Gender Response Care-Emotional Safety and Compassion

**David Stanley** 00:00

So emotional safety, we do need to be aware of the emotional safety of the men that we're working with. So we need to be aware of the role that shame has played in men's lives. And that's all this stuff I've been talking about, it becomes a primary driver in a lot of men's lives. And what shame does is that in order for men to recover and be emotionally safe, they need to know how to self soothe, self-regulate, and extend self-compassion. But all of those things, historically, in our culture have been associated with female things, you know, taking, it's the women, you know, there's a reason why there's, again I'm dating myself, but if folks remember the Calgon take me away commercials, it was this commercial for a woman who wanted to just leave everything, burn some candles, sit in the hot tub bubble bath for a couple hours reading a romance novel. So when we think about self-care, and even self-soothing, we think that it should come naturally for women like, oh, yeah, that's what women are supposed to do, right? But when we think about men, we don't think about men in the same way. There's a reason why it's a woman who's sitting in the bubble bath with the candle. Because in our culture, that's the implicit messages that say, that's not okay. It's changing, thank God, you know, thankfully. So all of these things that we need to do to create emotional safety for oneself gets blocked, because every time I try to access that I come to shame, and I go directly into anger. So sometimes when men, you try to get them to do these things, and it just kind of brings you back to that anger component. Just a note on compassion around since I was talking about self-compassion, this woman was a, back in Jimmy Carter days, she was an advisor to the president. And she said that I mean, literally, she said this, I believe that women have a capacity for understanding and compassion, which a man structurally, does not have, does not have it, because he cannot have it. He is just incapable of it. So what she's basically saying is that men are incapable of compassion because they were born men, and only women are able to understand compassion and be able to show compassion to other people. I show this only because this is an extreme example of some of those perceptions. So we perceive women to be more compassionate than men. We perceive women to be better helpers than men because of the societal norms and expectations. I think she's 100% totally wrong. Don't think, I know she's 100% totally wrong because if you've ever watched, gone on YouTube, and watched men rescue a kitten from a drainpipe and spent four hours trying to, you know, dig out a kitten or a puppy, then you can't at the same time, then say those men don't have compassion, because they're not getting, you know, they're not winning a million dollars to save the kitten. So what other motivator is there, and I believe that motivator for men to do those things is that compassion. A lot of men sign up to do, you know, go into helping professions who because they have compassion and want to show that compassion for others. So we think about men and compassion, compassion is really just recognizing the suffering and others, understanding the common humanity of the suffering, feeling emotionally connected with a person who is suffering, tolerating difficult feelings that may arise in acting, or being motivated to act to help the other person. Now, if we look at the very definition of compassion, we know that this is something that both men and women have the capacity to show other people and have the capacity to feel. So compassion with men, it's important to extend compassion to men to say, you know, seeing what you've been through in a context of all this kind of gender BS that you've, no wonder you struggle, that must be really tough for you to struggle with all these, you know, expectations, and try to be emotional and have relationships but also try not to do something that's going to bring shame. So the more we can kind of bring that compassion to the men that we're working with, the more they get a sense of what it feels like, and they become more capable or more comfortable with navigating the landscape of compassion, you know, helping others when they feel it and asking for help when oneself needs it. And that's, you know, like men and asking, you know, that I know this is kind of a gender stereotype. But you know, men asking for directions, you'll drive around and around for an hour and you know, you don't want to stop for directions. But in order to, for men to have a full sense of compassion, there also needs that to be that sense of self compassion, that I need to be soothed. I need to have somebody take care of me and that's okay. So oftentimes in life, we go around when we need to stop and ask for help. We don't we continue driving around in circles, sort of metaphorically speaking in our lives, because we feel that that vulnerability and asking someone for help might bring a sense of shame because men are supposed to know all the answers, right? They're supposed to be problem solvers. Alright, so what I do is I approach men not with, not with responsibility or accountability, but with mutual responsibility. That's it. So it's not accountability, not holding you accountable, I'm holding you mutually responsible, which means that you and I share power in a collaborative way. It means supporting men and making the decisions that will facilitate their own recovery, it's both the clinician and the client have equally important roles to play and are responsible to each other. So I'm not going to tell you what to do in treatment. I play my role, and I bring something to the table but you also need to bring yourself to the table and bring your own expertise to the table. We are responsible as a program of providing you services, but you are the one who actually needs to do the recovery work. So it's, I think, too often we think we need to hold men accountable but there's a power differential and holding men accountable, it means I don't have to do anything, you just need to come back and report to me. But when we're thinking about treatment, that's not how treatment works, it means I'm doing something for you. I'm providing you the counseling and the tools, you need to make your recovery work. But you need to show up, you need to be present, you need to do the recovery work. So again, I shift oftentimes, when I'm working with men, I make sure that I shift to mutual responsibility. Because then it doesn't feel so threatening, it helps them to feel more in control. So we know about the gender socialization, we kind of reviewed all that. But what happens is that men live all of that, their entire lives and are exposed to all of these gender socialization, norms and expectations. So when they go into treatment, there's a different expectation on how they're supposed to be as a man and what it means to survive. So when we receive, we think about the receive messages that men get all their lives, it might be don't show emotions, don't be weak, don't be a victim, be self-reliant and be powerful. Right. So those are some of the implicit message, implicit and explicit messages we get about what it means to be a man in our culture. And again, these are gross generalizations, this doesn't going to apply to every single man in our culture. But it's a generalization of how our culture, what messages our culture sends to men overall. But what happens is that the skills needed for trauma recovery, and for substance use disorder, treatment and recovery is that you need to express your feelings, you need to be vulnerable, you need to acknowledge your trauma rely on others, share power equally. So if we look at these two, we noticed there's a discrepancy. So you're being asked to do something that is the complete opposite of what you've been told to do all of your life. And when you step out of those gender norms and expectations, it brings a sense of vulnerability and shame, which doesn't feel safe. So for a lot of men, engaging them in treatment means saying, this must be really hard for you to express your feelings, given that all of your life you have been given these messages. It means acknowledging and confronting this discrepancy between the messages we've received and how we need to behave if we're going to move our recovery forward. Sometimes just acknowledging this and saying, no wonder you're struggling, look at what you're being asked to do. You're a guy who's lived all his life trying to hide your emotions and now we're asking you to express every single emotion that you're having. No wonder you're struggling and it makes sense that you're struggling, given everything that's happened in your life up to this point. And then I would work with that client to say how can we work with this? How can we help you to be more comfortable sharing your emotions or getting into contact with those emotions and acknowledging them. Sometimes in the men that I work with just simply going over this, is a major breakthrough for a lot of the men they go no wonder I'm struggling. I've been asked to do this all my life and now I'm being asked to do this.