

If only more men could express emotion like Professor Green

By Oscar Rickett (Guardian online 29 October 2015)

Talking about his dad's suicide moved the rapper to tears. But too many of us still think it's not manly to talk about feelings – and the consequences can be deadly



Professor Green as a child with his father.
Photograph: -/BBC/Antidote Productions

Professor Green's BBC3 [documentary *Suicide and Me*](#) – and his [appearance on Newsnight](#) to talk about it – have yet again raised questions about how men express (or don't express) their emotions. Asked by the Newsnight presenter Evan Davis what he would say to his father, who committed suicide seven years ago, the rapper was in tears as he answered. That was understandable. What was odd was that this open reaction could seem so strange. A man? Crying? Surely men don't have tear ducts?

Can Professor Green teach men to talk about suicide?

The British rapper's BBC3 documentary explores his father's death and discusses how men need to talk about their feelings to reduce the high rate of suicide

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In Britain the statistics and the stereotypes paint a grim picture: men struggle desperately to express their feelings and this struggle seriously affects the quality of their lives. A study

published by the British Journal of Health Psychology, in January this year, found that men who said they were less likely to seek help with mental health concerns were also more likely to endorse traditional masculine ideology, more likely to find it harder to express their emotions and more likely to fear intimacy.



This is hardly surprising given the way in which emotions are feminised in our society. As boys, we are told to "man up", to "not be a pussy", or to "stop acting like a girl". Our natural vulnerability is recast as weakness and processed into anger – an emotion condoned in men. As the American psychiatrist James Gilligan says in *The Mask You Live In*, a documentary examining masculinity in boys and young men: "Whether it's homicidal violence, or suicidal violence, people resort to such desperate behaviour only when they are

feeling shamed and humiliated, or feel that they would be if they didn't prove that they were real men."

At my school, showing emotion made you a "batty boy". Bullying was rife, and you dealt with your feelings with your hood up. Male stoicism cuts across the class spectrum in Britain. From the boarding school chap with the stiff upper lip, to the bloke in the pub with the thousand-yard stare, our masculine stereotypes all share a macho resistance to the expression of feeling. This can have fatal consequences.

The male suicide rate has increased significantly since 2007, according to Office for National Statistics figures in February. In 2013, 78% of suicides in the UK were male, suggesting that, while a higher percentage of women are diagnosed with depression, it is men who feel they do not have the personal capacity or social support to get help.

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Although I went to a school characterised by male cynicism and violence, I now imagine that I am an open person and can express my emotions. So do many of my male friends. But our more emotional conversations are often enabled by drugs and/or alcohol – as if the social barrier of masculinity needs to be broken down by a level of intoxication before we can tell each other how we feel.

But are we really communicating? How difficult it is for any of us to make a real emotional connection. In our ever more cut-throat economic environment – one that prizes competition far above kindness – we are struggling to be successful while working out how to express ourselves without betraying the dangerous masculine tropes we still internalise.

And so, while the now decades-old idea that gender is a social construct may be slowly creeping nearer to the mainstream, plenty of men haven't got the memo. At a wedding last year, I spoke to an old friend of mine about the breakdown of his marriage. In the end, he just couldn't find the language to express what was happening. "You know us lads, mate, we just can't talk about these things," he ended up telling me.

For many men it can feel as though there is a tidal wave of emotion rising up inside them, a wave that will engulf them if they don't keep fiercely silent. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," wrote Henry David Thoreau in the middle of the 19th century. Not much has changed.