

Interesting article looking at the trends in desires for aging males. FYI

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What Do Older Men Really Want?

By Abigail Trafford

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In one conference room, researchers talked about depression, suicide and broken dreams. In another, they spoke of joy and making dreams come true. In the first room the subject was men. In the second, women.

A not-so-funny thing happened on the way to longevity. Women, as they look forward to their later decades, are filled with new energy and optimism. Men are filled with despair and anger.

This is an exaggeration, of course. But a new kind of gender gap seems to be emerging between older men and women, according to the two sessions at the "What's Next: Boomer Business Summit" in Philadelphia last month. In the forum on what men want at midlife, psychotherapist Jed Diamond, author of "The Irritable Male Syndrome" (Rodale 2004), took the catastrophic view that "men are in decline" because "traditional male roles are no longer what's needed for economic and interpersonal success in the world." As a result, they are lost and confused about what they can expect in life.

Evidence of decline is reflected in male depression, which is getting increased attention from the National Institute of Mental Health. The highest suicide rates, for example, are found in men after age 65, according to national health statistics. At this age, roughly 10 men kill themselves for every woman who commits suicide, Diamond pointed out.

It's as though history has pulled the rug out from under men, especially as they approach retirement age. What's their identity without a job title? What's their purpose? Turmoil in the workplace has already left many men on the sidelines, unable to earn a living wage to support a family. Meanwhile, women have been getting a foothold in fields formerly dominated by men. In 1970, less than 1 percent of degrees in dentistry went to women; today, women account for more than 40 percent. Men have become the second sex, declared Diamond.

Yo, Freud! What do older men really want? In the men's session, a woman in the audience stood up and cried: "Mothers!" Everybody laughed. "Hair!" quipped another woman. More laughter. Ballroom dancing, suggested a third. An edge of contempt crept into the discussion. How the tables had turned.

Diamond quickly defended older men by saying: "It's not mothers -- they want nurturing!"

But women just wish men would grow up. The sexes are out of sync. Women who have completed the nurturing task of raising children are ready to move on and score in the workplace and the community -- while men, who have devoted their years to making it in the workplace, suddenly find themselves alone in an empty house. As Diamond put it: "She says, 'I want to get out and do stuff.' He says, 'I want to stay home and cuddle.' "

Well, that shouldn't be a problem, I thought. Women like to cuddle, too. I was part of the panel on women, and we talked about the importance of relationships, from grandparenting to romance, with a lot of cuddling in between. Surely men and women can find some common ground at this stage. In fact, this is the period of life when we should come together. We are on the same developmental page, seeking a new chapter. We're not burdened by driving car pools or trying to make the cover of Time. (Though we still might do both.) Now we have time to play together the way we did in kindergarten. We're back to that old Marlo Thomas song: "Free to Be . . . You and Me."

Yet the divergence in the two panel discussions was stunning. We women had a sense of exuberance when we talked about what we wanted to do with these bonus years. The men had a sense of hopelessness.

In the men's session, panelist John Maloney, vice president of communications for Volvo Cars North America, had insight into what men want, at least in cars: power. Three-quarters of the buyers of the 300-plus horsepower car are men, while the majority of those who choose the 100-plus horsepower car are women. The marketing strategy for high-powered cars aimed at males is based on three words: Performance. Exhilaration. Control. That's what men want in their lives, he said, adding: "You can sell a young man's car to an old man, but you can't sell an old man's car to anybody."

Wait a minute. What's an old man's car, anyway? This is ageism messing up the male psyche. This is playing on nostalgia for what has been lost -- and rubbing it in. Performance: Of course you can't run an eight-minute mile anymore. You may need a prescription for Viagra. So what? Control: Obviously a worker has no control over downsizing, outsourcing, plant closings. By midlife you realize -- or you're forced to realize -- that you don't have total control over your destiny in work, in relationships or in health. Exhilaration: Not possible when a person is depressed and feels worthless, even harder for individuals to climb out of despair when they belong to a class of people that's marginalized.

Women seem to have learned these lessons in earlier stages of life. They tend to reframe performance as meaningful experience. They gain a sense of control from building a network of supportive relationships as well as from seeking power. Maybe that's why they approach their later years with more enthusiasm. Yet most of them want their men to share the opportunity for new experiences, closer relationships and, yes, exhilaration. So perhaps there's a new agenda for compassionate feminism: to lead the attack on a culture of decline that is sinking too many men -- and finally close the gender gap.*

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