

Men well advised

A guide to gender-reflective counselling
for boys, men and fathers

“Men well advised” is a translation of the German original “Männer gut beraten. Ein Leitfa-
den zur geschlechterreflektierten Beratung
von Jungen, Männern und Vätern”. The guide
was developed in the German context and
mostly according to German literature and
data. Therefore, most references, links and
institutions are German. However, the infor-
mation given can presumably be transferred
to the situation of men in other countries.

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Foreword by Ekin Deligöz

Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal
Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth 04

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Ekin Deligöz

Photo: © Bundesregierung/Steffen Kugler.

Foreword

Dear Reader,

Distressing experiences, personal crises, helplessness and anger – we all know these situations and feelings in life. These are times when it is important to have someone who listens and advises. A good counsellor can assess the situation and identify ways out of the crisis. Good counselling is worth its weight in gold; in the best case, it can save lives.

Since no two people or situations are the same, appropriately tailored counselling services are crucial. There is still too little help for men who are exposed to challenging situations as fathers or as victims of intimate partner violence. In addition, men are less likely to seek counselling. Most of the time, they make use of services only when it comes to general topics or in the context of couples or family counselling.

Here at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, gender equality policy means taking all genders into account. This also includes a counselling landscape that is sensitive to boys and men and that can respond to problems specific to men in a supportive and helpful way.

I therefore deeply appreciate the important work that the Federal Forum for Men, an umbrella organization of boys', men's and father's associations active nationwide, is doing to strengthen networks and increase the visibility

of counselling services for boys, men and fathers.

Examples from counselling practice show that boys and men accept help when they feel that they are being explicitly addressed.

This guide on gender-reflective counselling for boys, men and fathers serves as a foundation for this work: it provides many suggestions from the practice, for the practice. It offers counsellors, gender equality officers and all interested parties a clear introduction to this important topic.

I would like to thank the Federal Forum for Men and all the experts involved for helping to develop this guide. May it help boys and men to also feel well advised.

Warm regards,



Ekin Deligöz

Parliamentary State Secretary

to the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

»The small spaces of social situations are the domain of social interaction.«

Knoblauch 1994, p. 35

We would like to expressly thank all members of the »Advisory Board on Men's Counselling« who contributed to the development of this guide with their expertise.

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A large, stylized teal number '1' is positioned on the left side of the page, set against a dark blue background. The number is composed of a vertical bar and a horizontal top bar that extends to the left, creating a unique, geometric shape.

Introduction

**»I like my men in counselling.
They are so sweet!«**

»Life is easier with a sensitive man
than with your typical macho.«

**»He talks big, but claims that he just can't
find a job. Doesn't he think about his
children?«**

**»It's so disrespectful
when guys don't even
shake your hand.«**

»Sometimes I have a queasy
feeling when a hulk of a man like
that sits across from me.«

»The guy just broke down
and started crying.«

**»Men are somehow less
complicated.«**

»I just can't relate to
his problems.«

1.1 Neutrality

An unrealisable standard in counselling

Anyone who counsels people is familiar with statements or thoughts like these – from themselves or from others. Thinking like this is neither unusual nor special and it happens every day. And because this is a fact, according to the basic conviction of this guide, statements and thoughts like these make it clear that there is no such thing as »neutral« counselling – just as there is no such thing as a »neutral« interaction between people. The experiences we have with others and how our perception of the world is shaped by them always play a role. This does not only mean the specific biographical experiences we have as individuals. It also refers to our integration into larger social contexts: experiences as a man, a woman or a non-binary person; experiences as people of different nationalities and sexual orientations, as people with a certain cultural tradition, religion or ethnicity.

**»I advise clients.
Gender doesn't
play a role.«**

Social categories such as age, class, »race«¹, ethnicity or gender »pierce through the rules of equality institutionalised in service interaction,« (Knoblauch 1994, p. 39f) like different coloured threads pierce through the cloth on a loom. Counselling creates an interpersonal space that is never free of hierarchy, privilege, presuppositions and personal values. This is unavoidable, but does not necessarily have to become a problem if it is always made clear and dealt with mindfully. With this guide, we draw attention specifically to the category of gender, or more precisely to masculinity.

.....
1 There is much controversy surrounding the concept of »race«. See: Maureen Maisha Auma (2020): Für eine intersektionale Antidiskriminierungspolitik In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte No. 42–44. Online: <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/antirassismus-2020/316764/fuer-eine-intersektionale-antidiskriminierungspolitik#footnode1-1> [21/02/2022].

1.2 Forms of masculinity

Stereotypes and their effects

**»Men don't have problems.
They have solutions.«**

**»Are you a man or do
you need help?«**

**»Men have feelings too. For
example, they feel hungry or
thirsty.«**

These are some common and widespread stereotypes about men. Some people find them funny, while others experience a stereotype as a form of devaluation and feel hurt. However, because stereotypes are exaggerations, they are never completely true. Similarly, there are no men to whom the statements apply perfectly. Nor do stereotypes adequately represent reality at all. Generally, reality is more complex and differentiated.

Nevertheless, stereotypes hit a nerve and often there is a »kernel of truth« in them. Stereotypes crystallise prevailing gender ideals in everyday life; that is, they reflect social norms and unquestioned self-evident facts. They reduce complexity and, through sometimes affectionate, sometimes malicious ridicule, help us to find our way in the social world and to sort out reality. Through

this process and by accepting some things as customary or taking them for granted and others not, our »own« reality is formed. Gender stereotypes are part of our everyday life and contribute to creating gender in interactions, in interpersonal encounters (doing gender).²

For a long time it was considered true, that there were exactly two genders – men and women – and there were clear »natural« differences between them. Today there is a wide consensus and also legally recognised, that there are more than two genders and the boundaries are by no means so clear. There are differences and similarities between the sexes. Moreover, the differences within the respective groups – i.e. among men or among women – are sometimes greater than those between the sexes, depending on the perspective. We experience that gender perceptions are pluralising and today stand side by side, often unconnected: on the one hand, there are very different concepts of masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, many people still have clear ideas about what constitutes a »real« man and a »real« woman.

.....
 2 Examples for further reading: Sabine Hark / Hanna Meißner (2018): Geschlechterverhältnisse und die (Un-)Möglichkeit geschlechtlicher Vielfalt. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung; online: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/gender-diversitaet/geschlechtliche-vielfalt-trans/245179/geschlechterverhaeltnisse-und-die-un-moeglichkeit-geschlechtlicher-vielfalt/> or Nils Pickert (2021): Klischeefrei erzählen, Pinkstinks Germany, online: <https://pinkstinks.de/klischeefrei-erzaehlen/> [21/02/2022].

1.3 Successful men's counselling

Aim and nature of the guide

We all have to deal with gender models every day, both their pluralisation as well as their persistent effects. This is also true for counselling: for a person who seeks counselling and for a person working as a counsellor. When considering men and ideals of masculinity, it is clear that many men find it difficult to ask for help. Even in crises and difficult life situations, boys, men and fathers often do not seek professional help and support, or do so at a late stage. This is not least because of gender stereotypes. Men often find it difficult to perceive and accept their own need for help and vulnerability. Men, according to a view that is still widespread, do not need help and are not vulnerable – because what must not be, cannot be. In fact, it is still often taboo, both individually and in society as a whole.

Against this background, the question arises whether and how gender ideals and demands of masculinity have an effect in counselling contexts, how they are themselves focused upon or at least need to be taken into account. This is exactly where this guide for gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented men's counselling comes in. It explicitly invites men in counselling contexts neither to be understood as gender-neutral clients nor to encounter them with unreflective gender-stereotyped expectations. The guide aims to encourage people to put on the »gender glasses« and to be sensitive in the counselling processes to the effectiveness of models and the demands of masculinity: in the thinking, speaking and acting of male clients as well as in a counsellor's own role as a professional specialist.

This guide has an introductory nature and aims to encourage people to deal more intensively with questions around masculinity in the context of men's counselling. To this end, the guide provides an overview of the topic of men's counselling, addresses conceptual and methodological issues, provides practical examples and offers further advice.

The target audience for this guide includes all professionals who work with men in counselling contexts and who wish to learn more about what the motives and topics of counselling have to do with masculinity and how they can use this knowledge productively in the counselling process. This objective concerns the whole range of psychosocial counselling, but also, for example, career counselling or counselling in the field of health and rehabilitation.

To put men's counselling into practical terms, we spoke with counsellors working in various counselling contexts about their respective practical experiences. We would like to thank all the contributors who gave us insights into their everyday counselling work. We would also like to thank all the experts who contributed their experience and constructive criticism. In particular, the dialogue with the Advisory Board for the Counselling of Men, which we had established especially for this purpose, was very valuable and substantially enriched the development of this guide.

We are convinced that

- men (and boys and fathers) need to be addressed in their diversity in a specific way and that this should be taken into account in counselling processes;
 - there are problems and needs specific to men that need to be addressed with appropriate counselling, support and assistance services;
 - many men are actually less likely to seek help, support and counselling despite an existing need;
 - counsellors themselves have gender ideals and stereotypes of men and women in their minds, which – intentionally or unintentionally – flow into their counselling work;
 - counselling processes with boys, men and fathers can be qualitatively better (both in terms of the process and outcome) if a gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented perspective is adopted.
-

The background consists of large, overlapping abstract shapes in two colors: a dark, muted blue and a vibrant teal. The shapes are organic and fluid, creating a modern, geometric aesthetic. The teal shapes are primarily on the right side, while the dark blue shapes are more prominent on the left and bottom.

Basic concepts



2.1 Motives for counselling men

Crises and transitions

Over the course of a lifetime, there are many situations and occasions when good counselling would be invaluable. The boy who wonders whether everything is »normal« with him sexually. The young man who wants to learn a profession that doesn't suit his parents. Or the father-to-be who has many questions but feels like a supporting actor. **Often, experiences of crises or transitions in the course of life** are an important trigger to get professional help and seek counselling. Sometimes, the aim is primarily professional counselling: a person is seeking information and advice on concrete questions or decision-making situations. Other times it is more about guidance in the sense of accompanying change processes in complex or difficult issues. Whatever the case, counselling is a situation where questions can be asked and issues can become conscious, where a counterpart listens, where things can be clarified or new perspectives can be developed.

For **boys and young men**, specific motives for counselling include puberty and the transition to adulthood (»becoming a man«), questions about sexuality or coming out and experiences of discrimination as a homosexual man. Other motives include topics surrounding **becoming a father and being a father**, pregnancy and birth, the father-child relationship and changes in a partnership as well as questions about parental leave and parental allowance, the division of housework, care duties and gainful employment within a couple relationship or the compatibility of work and family life. However, fathers and

couples in separation and divorce situations also have a high demand for counselling, not only for legal concerns, but above all to address issues of crisis and conflict management and communication. Another transition for many men that should not be underestimated is retirement. Men have questions about what comes after the often-formative phase of working life and how they should reorganise their everyday life.

Other motives for counselling can be **health or work-related crises** and the associated »processing patterns«: a serious illness, mental stress, depression, sexual disorders, burnout or addictive behaviour. Last but not least, the **issue of violence** has its own focus in counselling men, since for some men, violent behaviour and a lack of impulse control become a problem. The various approaches of (preventive) work with offenders counter this. However, men are also affected by violence – in the public sphere as well as in the private sphere, as children and as adults. There is often still a lack of adequate services or an understanding of needs, because men as victims do not really appear in our usual images of gender and masculinity.

2.2 Supply and demand

Help and counselling for men

Motives and needs for counselling men – further reading

SKM Bundesverband

Konzept der Jungen- und Männerberatung [Concept for Counselling Men and Boys]

Düsseldorf 2020, S. 8ff

Online: https://www.skmev.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SKM-EMR-Konzeptpapier2020_web.pdf [21.02.2022]

Landeshauptstadt Stuttgart

[State capital of Stuttgart]

Männerhandbuch [Handbook for Men]

Stuttgart, 2021

<https://www.stuttgart.de/medien/ibs/web-maennerhandbuch-2021.pdf> [07.06.2023]

Eduard Waidhofer»Männer leiden anders«

[Men Suffer Differently]

Erfahrungen mit Männern in Therapie und Beratung, 2016, p. 157ff

Practical examples in this guide

(See also Chapter 4)

Many counselling services are of course also aimed at men, but their approach is gender-neutral. Compared to services that are specifically targeting women, dedicated services for men are less common. Men are definitely present as clients of counselling, help and support services. However, men are almost never explicitly addressed as men in counselling. To be sure, men also have a gender. However, in the context of gender and equality, it is still much more common to focus primarily on women and female life contexts. For example, this is why in social work with the homeless, with ex-prisoners, in addiction support or debt counselling, most of the work is done with men, yet this fact is hardly ever systematically taken into account at the level of gender.

Moreover, men are generally less likely to seek help, support and counselling and more often believe that they can manage on their own or that they must. This can be illustrated with the example of health. According to a recent study by the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), men assess their subjective health as good more often than women (RKI 2021, p. 7f). At the same time, they do less for their health, because on average women behave in a more health-conscious way than men (ibid., p. 29ff) and in a gender comparison, make more frequent use of medical treatment (ibid., p. 53ff). This also applies to psychotherapeutic treatment, which is demanded significantly more often by young women than by young men. It is also apparent that among men,

the demand for psychotherapeutic services decreases with an increasing level of education. This may also have something to do with the fact that men are diagnosed with depression and mental illnesses less often and deal with these differently, for example through increased addictive behaviour. Accordingly, men are more often affected by addictions, are more often incapacitated for work and commit suicide three times as often.³

»Men tend to be more likely (...) to use medical services only after illnesses have already manifested themselves.«

RKI 2021, p. 58

Autonomy and self-control, which have enormous relevance in the prevailing model of masculinity, play a role here that should not be underestimated (Gruen 1986).

There is much to suggest that such a pattern can also be applied to the demand by men for counselling services. This is confirmed, for example, by the findings of a recent study on family education and counselling facilities. According to this study, the proportion of fathers among the participants of corresponding services is about one fifth and has remained almost unchanged over the last 15 years. Fathers are actually the most frequent users of counselling services, but here too mothers dominate by three quarters (Prognos 2021, p. 53ff).

»The fact that men generally request therapy and counselling less often does not indicate a lower need for help (...), but primarily expresses the greater level of fear that men have towards therapy and counselling.«

Brandes/Bullinger 1996, p. 5

There are many reasons for the lower utilisation rates of counselling services by men and fathers. Among other factors, the reasons have to do with existing counselling structures and the specific reason for counselling, with access pathways, target group approaches and business hours, with the (lack of) perception of opportunities and with the pressure of suffering. Last but not least, they also have to do with men's attitudes towards counselling and the »psycho stuff« associated with it. An empirical analysis of terms used in connection with counselling services in the context of involuntary

.....
 3 See BZgA [German Federal Centre for Health Education] 'Men's Health Portal: Männer leiden unbemerkt [Men suffer unnoticed], online: <https://www.maennergesundheitsportal.de/themen/psychische-erkrankungen/maenner-leiden-unbemerkt/> [21/02/2022].

childlessness has shown that the common and established term »psychosocial counselling« arouses aversion and resistance, especially among many men:

»Those who make use of such [psychosocial counselling] document a lack of robustness, particular vulnerability, too much sensitivity and also a lack of toughness, which is a stain on masculinity. (...) Men in no way deny the usefulness and meaningfulness of psychosocial counselling – but they reflexively direct it to women and, in extreme situations, to men who can no longer help themselves due to burnout or depression. (...) For men, the word ‘psycho’ has primarily negative connotations; for them it signals mental exhaustion, disturbance, disbalance, instability, an impending loss of reality and lack of self-control. This is contrary to the normative ideal of strong masculinity that is dominant in our society.« Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) 2021, p. 16f

Bringing men into counselling processes and counselling them well therefore has the following implications

- **Addressing men specifically** and ensuring accessibility – so that more men take advantage of counselling services.
 - **Addressing men in terms of content** – so that defensiveness and scepticism disappear and men feel that they are being included.
 - **Addressing men as men** – so that a man’s realm of experience and their diversity become visible and can be used for the counselling process.
 - **Addressing men also with a view to masculinity** – so that the position of men in the gender order becomes visible and individual and social processes of change can be initiated.
-

2.3 Men's counselling

An overview and classification

Men's work, which also gave rise to men's counselling, emerged as an independent approach parallel to the women's movement from the 1970s (von Bargen/Goosses 2012, Theunert/Luterbach 2021, p. 53ff). At that time, men's work was also linked to a strong political orientation towards changing gender relations. This connection still exists today, but the approaches and offers have become increasingly differenti-

ated and professionalised. However, we are still a long way from nationwide provision in Germany. Men's counselling is also positioned differently in terms of funding and framework conditions; it is not part of standard care.

Development phases of men's work

according to Theunert/Luterbach 2021, p. 54ff



Emergence and discursive articulation

Mid-1970s to late 1980s



Differentiation and institutionalisation

Late 1980s to the turn of the millennium



Professionalisation and politicisation

2000 until around 2015



Anchoring in standard care?

From 2015

For us, **men's work** is the generic term under which various approaches to work with men can be subsumed. Men's work always means work with boys, men and fathers (in their diversity). The following areas can be further differentiated:

Men's counselling

Counselling work with men

Men's therapy

Therapeutic work with men

Men's education

Educational work with men

Men's self-awareness

Self-awareness for men

This differentiation is to be understood as a distinction of ideals; in practice, there are often overlaps. In the following, our focus is on men's counselling.

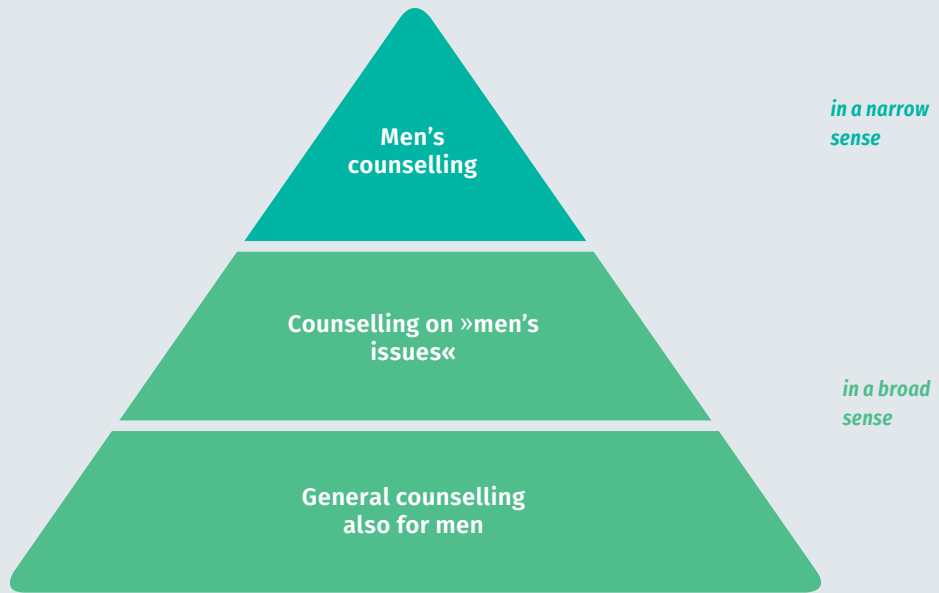
For us, **men's counselling** is a professionally anchored counselling activity that is institutionally located in the counselling landscape or in the support system. This includes coaching and counselling services for men that are paid for or self-paid. Affected persons' organisations also often do high-quality work in the context of self-help; however, as long as this is not a professional counselling activity, we do not include it in the narrow sense of men's counselling.

The broadest understanding of men's counselling is any form of counselling for men. The narrowest definition involves exclusively men counselling men in their self-reflective and change-oriented process of being a man.⁴

.....
⁴ On the question of the gender of the counsellor or whether ultimately only men should or can provide counselling, see also Chapter 3.2 below.

Three perspectives

on forms of »men's counselling«



1 Men's counselling in the narrow sense is specific counselling in which the topics of masculinity and being a man are of central importance. Men's counselling focuses on the individual gender situation of boys and men and is based on a gender-reflective analysis of socially mediated demands of masculinity and cultural images of men. It aims to support men in finding constructive and solution-oriented strategies and approaches for change in their individual situation.

2 By **counselling on »men's issues«**, we mean counselling services with a focus on original men's issues. These can be explicitly male-specific counselling events (e.g. separated fathers, gay counselling, men as victims of intimate partner violence or urological health counselling). Alternatively, they can be thematically focused counselling services for a target group that actually consists of a majority of men (e.g. counselling for ex-prisoners, homeless people or young adult asylum seekers). In such services, the topic of masculinity is often only implicitly present. A gender-reflective and masculinity-ori-

ented perspective can substantially complement and underpin thematically focused counselling.

3 **General counselling also for men** refers to professional counselling services on different topics and events (e.g. family, education, sexuality, health or work), in which (also) men are addressed as seekers of advice and help. The main focus is on access to the topic, and counselling is aimed at both women and men. Masculinity is not the focus here either, often not even the fact that men are being counselled. The question here is how men can be reached and addressed more strongly as a special target group. Furthermore the question is, what broadening of perspectives is possible through a gender-reflective approach to the topics and questions being discussed.

Men’s counselling in a narrow sense (first perspective) is usually offered by experienced professionals who work in a gender-reflective way in counselling (or also therapeutically). A characteristic feature is the explicitly gender-reflective approach, which is expressed in the attitude and focus of counselling and in which images of masculinity and demands of masculinity themselves become an object of counselling.

Men’s counselling in a broad sense (second and third perspective) is offered in particular by counselling centres of municipal institutions (sometimes also municipal women’s and equal opportunities officers), charities or independent organisations that work exclusively, predominantly or only with men (and boys and fathers). As a rule, both male and female professionals are active in this area and the work is differentiated according to different fields of counselling.

In this guide, we have primarily focused on this second group – men’s counselling in a broader

sense.⁵ Reflecting on masculinity from a professional perspective can be helpful for this group both in shaping the counselling process and in enriching the content of the counselling work through changed perspectives.

To do this, we build on the established and evolved practice of men’s counselling as well as the existing professional concepts and proposals. We would like to take up these concepts, link them, make them better known and strengthen them in the sense of a gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented perspective. In the medium term, we would like to see gender and masculinity competence as a quality criterion for good men’s counselling as a whole.

.....

⁵ The focus here is on professionals, especially from the context of psychosocial work, social work and social education work in social counselling, offender work and violence counselling, parenting, family and couples counselling, sexual and pregnancy conflict counselling, addiction support, health counselling, but also career and unemployment counselling.

Our online portal for counselling

for boys, men and fathers

When boys, men and fathers look for counselling and support services for themselves, they often do not know where or how to find these services. Many of the existing counselling services are gender-neutral and do not directly address boys, men and fathers. Men's counselling includes counselling services that address men as a target group, are specialised in men's issues or are characterised by a professional approach to male role models and stereotypes.

www.maennerberatungsnetz.de

männerberatungsnetz.de

Beratung für Jungen, Männer & Väter

→ **facilitates the search** for help and counselling services specifically aimed at boys, men and fathers.

→ **bundles counselling services** for men on various issues: work, poverty, education, parenting, family, health, violence, imprisonment and jail, homosexuality, crisis, partnership, care, homelessness, sexuality, separation and divorce, fatherhood, compatibility and satisfaction.

→ **collects services** that are especially aimed at boys, men and fathers and range from individual counselling to self-help groups and guided men's groups.

→ **supports men** in finding counselling and help quickly and directly.

2.4 Theoretical principles

Gender and masculinity

We all have **gender ideals and gender stereotypes** in our minds, even if these are becoming increasingly pluralised. Many ideals seem self-evident and are not questioned any further: men »really« are like this and women are like that. Others are irritating or are perceived as abnormal and raise questions. As social norms and reference patterns, we often take common gender images so much for granted that they seem »natural« to us in this sense. As guiding principles, they literally shape our view of the world. They shape our understanding – of ourselves, of our counterparts, of what is considered »masculine« or »feminine« in culture and society. They also guide us in what we do, how we meet others, the pigeonholes we have in our heads, what we expect from others, how we behave accordingly.

These are **attributions and classifications** that have an effect not only in everyday life but also in counselling. They pervade the process often quite unconsciously, if we are not actively aware of them and deal with them reflectively. In this way, images, interpretations and prejudices come up during the counselling process and these can also influence the course of counselling. For example, as two men's counsellors describe from their own practical counselling experience (Bertsch/Christandl 2016, p. 128): »That's a real macho man! Ah – another disenfranchised father! Another perpetrator who doesn't fulfil male responsibility! Doesn't

this guy just want to strengthen his power position towards his partner with his pseudo-feminism?«

In this way, a **reality** is produced in a way – in everyday life as well as in counselling processes – by confirming, negotiating or even changing gender images and the social norms that go with them. This is similar to inner beliefs that can solidify into individual patterns, only on a social level. If everyone considers something to be normal and behaves accordingly, then it becomes **normality** – and thus also the prevailing reality. For a long time, the »mainstream« of this reality was – and still is for many – the assumption that there are two, and exactly only two genders, which are also related to each other in terms of sexual desire (**heteronormative gender dualism**). This is considered the norm: a self-evident concept that does not need to be explained. Everything else, in contrast, is a deviation and requires justification and explanation. In this mainstream thought, the prevailing models also include ideas of what typically makes a man and a woman, how men and women should behave, what they are good at, what they are not so good at, and what they are like in their self-image and identity as a man or a woman. These social norms and gender images, as well as the demands on masculinity and femininity, have repercussions on the individuals; they are appropriated and internalised in socialisation processes.

This begins at birth with the question: »Is it a boy or a girl?« and continues in the family, at day care, at school, in peer groups and in other life and work contexts. Thus, inadvertently, the »pink-blue trap« snaps shut (see also Verlan/Schnerring 2014).

»One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.«

This is the famous quote by Simone de Beauvoir from her work »The Second Sex«. This also applies to men.

In this respect, gender – in the sense of gender models, demands of masculinity and femininity and also a person's understanding of themselves as a man or woman – is »fabricated«. That is, it is appropriated in processes of gender socialisation and updated in countless everyday situations. Nevertheless, the results of these processes also have weight and scope; they are not discretionary and can be changed again just like that. In the vast majority of cases, people »are« men or women, they have become so and this has an impact on their experiences, their thinking, their actions and their relationship to themselves: Geschlecht als Existenzweise »**Gender as a mode of existence**« (see Maihofer 1995).

There is another aspect to consider. Masculinity and femininity, as the two interrelated sides of the modern gender order, do not stand side-by-side in equal weight; they are in a hierarchical relationship. The **masculine side** is the dominant, norm-setting side. For a long time, it was regarded as **general and self-evident**, against which the feminine side stands out as subordinate, deviant, special. For example, this distinction can be seen in many languages (generic masculine) or in the idea of a normal male working life (full-time and without interruptions in employment due to care responsibilities); social security in the modern working society is based on this concept.

»The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it.«

Bourdieu 2001, p. 9

In this respect, masculinity is associated with the privilege of being considered the norm and not having to question or justify one's own position. It is not without reason that the work by Simone de Beauvoir quoted above is called »The Second Sex«. Conversely, however, this leads to the specific masculine image disappearing behind the general and not being seen. Male life situations and contexts, the risks associated with them or the suffering from the demands of masculinity tend to be lost from view (see Brandes/Bullinger 1995). Moreover, by no means do all men correspond to this ideal of male domination, which asserts itself as normality. The **masculine order** is also **increasingly less self-evident** today, as cultural disputes about gender language, privileges, »old white men« and similar concepts demonstrate. On the individual level of being a man, this often leads to uncertainty, but also to the fact that ideas and lifestyles of masculinity are pluralising and images of masculinity are changing and becoming more diverse (the »new« man or father). For men, it can be an enormous challenge to notice what they perceive as feminine actions or perspectives in themselves and to accept and positively integrate them.

All of these concepts are brought into the counselling process in one way or another by men who ask for and use counselling: gender models and stereotypes, male socialisation experiences and the associated basic psychological structures as a man, **insecurities** and the experience of increasingly **contradictory demands**. In men's counselling, such gender-theoretical considerations can be addressed. Many counselling approaches, especially systemic ones with their constructivist background, also offer conceptual possibilities for connection. Men's counselling can offer concrete support to those seeking advice and help in their respective situations and at the same time be a vehicle to sensitise men to gender equality issues, to interest them in individual and social change efforts and to make potential emancipation gains clear to them.

Against this background, the starting point of gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented counselling is the following:

»Men are a social group, but not a homogeneous unit. However, all people of the male gender have at least one thing in common: they have to find a way to deal with the demands of masculinity. Whether they accept them unquestioningly, creatively reinterpret them or refuse to accept them is their personal decision. Only one thing is not possible: not to refer to demands of masculinity in one form or another.«

Theunert 2021, p. 5

Essential demands of masculinity that men must deal with include the **patterns of male socialisation**. These are different for each individual man. Nevertheless, typical aspects can be named that many men experience in the course of their socialisation and which lead to basic **coping principles of being a man**. These patterns and the coping principles related to them are a useful heuristic tool for engaging with men in counselling processes (see Neumann/Süfke 2004).

In the course of their socialisation, boys and men must deal with the socially prevailing ideals and the demands of masculinity and must integrate them into their self-image. Some statements have already been said about this topic. Boys grow up with these omnipresent standards. As a rule, they first try to live up to them in order to be considered a »real« boy or man. In doing so, they learn, both ideally and generally speaking, that there is, naturally, a difference between men and women. Men have a dominant position in society and are considered the norm. They are expected to behave according to the norm and deviations are negatively sanctioned. Masculinity must be maintained, confirmed and proven again and again – especially in adolescence and in the context of male peer groups, even if this can be »performed« in very different ways. In particular, boys and men must distance themselves from everything that is socially associated with femininity. In other words, they dissociate themselves from women and female contexts, from supposed weakness and the feelings associated with it. This includes homosexuality.

In addition, socialisation processes – again seen in a generalised and schematic way – are accompanied by experiences that lead to incongruence at the internal psychological level more often in boys than in girls. That is, those processes that lead to an incomplete integration of impulses, feelings and needs are more common in boys. Boys tend to detach from the primary caregiver (usually the mother) earlier than girls and feelings are not mirrored in the same way. The resulting unfulfilled needs for closeness and security and the feelings that are poorly integrated into the self due to the lack of mirroring are rejected, negatively evaluated or associated with shame. Moreover, in their first years of life boys still experience predominantly women as caregivers (their own mothers or the mothers of friends, teachers in day care centres or after-school care centres, primary school teachers, etc.) and grow up in a world dominated by women; they therefore lack adult male counterparts present in everyday life for gender identification to whom they can positively refer in their own gender identity development. The only way out is indirect identification: at some point it becomes clear to a young boy that women are not men. As far as they identify themselves as boys and men-to-be or are addressed as such, they are, according to the unconscious adjustment, the opposite of women. Accordingly, they separate themselves from what they experience as feminine and begin to suppress

these areas of the self, which they nevertheless also have.

As a result, these socialisation experiences lead to the fact that parts of the self – certain impulses, feelings and needs – tend to be rejected or repelled by boys and men and they lose access to them (**denial of the self**). The lack of ability to perceive one's own inner workings well and to be able to use this as a guide for action is then often experienced as **helplessness**, which stands in contrast to the demands of masculinity:

»Helplessness [is] one of, if not the most, problematic feelings for men (...). The state of helplessness stands in stark contrast to the social demand on men to be active, creative, independent, problem-solving and never powerless.«

Neumann/Süfke 2004, p. 39

Men face the dilemma between neediness on the one hand and lack of access to their own inner world on the other, with various attempts at compensation, which can be summarised in a total of seven **coping principles of being a man**.

Coping principles of being a man*

1 Externalisation
External orientation in
thought and action

2 Muteness
Emotional
speechlessness

3 Solitude
Aloneness; sorting
things out with oneself

4 Rationality
Rejection and devaluation of self-related
emotional areas and overemphasis on
reason, logic and feasibility

5 Control
Control of one's own feelings;
control and power in social
relationships

6 Distancing from the body
Functionalisation of one's own body;
health neglect; avoidance of physicality
towards other men

7 Violence
towards oneself (competitive pressure,
pressure to perform etc.), towards other
people (physical and sexual violence), to-
wards things and the environment

* Originally from Böhnisch, Lothar/Winter, Reinhard: Männliche Sozialisation. Bewältigungsprobleme männlicher Geschlechtsidentität im Lebensverlauf, Weinheim 1997; quoted here from: Neumann/Süfke 2004, p. 33ff. See also Theunert 2021, p. 9ff.

Knowing these coping principles and being sensitive in counselling processes as to whether and how they become relevant opens up an additional quality dimension to work with male clients. Furthermore, these principles offer concrete starting points for change processes. For therapy and the counselling of men, it follows that men must be encouraged to speak – in both the sense of talking to the man about himself and **encouraging the man to speak** about things he has not learned to speak about (cf. Neumann/Süfke 2004).

Recommendations for initial and further reading

Bola, JJ (2019): Mask off.

Masculinity Redefined, London

Pickert, Nils (2020): Prinzessinnenjungs.

Wie wir unsere Söhne aus der Geschlechterfalle befreien, Weinheim/Basel

Süfke, Björn (2010): Männerseelen.

Ein psychologischer Reiseführer, Munich

Urwin, Jack (2016): Man Up.

Surviving Modern Masculinity, London

The background features a large, stylized number '3' in a dark blue color. The number is set against a teal background. The top and bottom curves of the '3' are filled with a lighter teal color, creating a layered effect. The text 'Recommendations for practice' is positioned in the center-left area of the image, overlapping the dark blue part of the number '3'.

Recommendations for practice



3.1 Working in a gender-reflective way

Men's counselling in practice

The key results of the previous chapter can be summarised as follows (see also Theunert 2021, p. 10):

-
- Male socialisation exists.
 - Demands of masculinity exist.
 - Demands of masculinity have a standardising and hierarchising effect.
 - Men want to meet demands of masculinity.
 - Male socialisation standardises and limits development and diversity.
 - Male socialisation justifies social inequality and gender hierarchies.
-

In one way or another, these aspects will be expressed in counselling processes with men. A gender-reflexive approach to men's counselling can be sensitive to these thoughts and has possibilities for dealing with them productively in the counselling process. These aspects can »tag along« in the **background to draw attention** and adjust possible interventions. However, they can also serve as the basis for a proactive approach by making demands of masculinity and patterns of male socialisation the actual topic of counselling and encouraging men to speak up in this sense.

Here, the level of **interaction in the counselling setting** must remain in focus. It is not only the client who has a gender. The gender of the counsellor will also play a role in counselling. In this respect, it is important to keep looking at oneself, to consciously and reflectively put on the gender glasses and be aware of »doing gender« in the counselling process and in one's own counselling activities:

»Gender is very important in the psychotherapeutic and counselling process because the gender of the client and the counsellor/therapist affects the therapeutic relationship. Gender-sensitive and gender-competent psychotherapy and counselling must therefore also take into account the interaction between the two. Not only do psychotherapists change clients, but clients also change their psychotherapists.«

Waidhofer 2016, p. 141

A fundamental dilemma of gender-reflective counselling work with men is the question of the **area of tension** between normative-political demands on the one hand and a counselling attitude open to results on the other (see Theunert/Luterbach 2021, p. 21f). Is it the primary task of gender-reflective work to place itself productively at the service of the issue and the work assignment that the clients formulate from their subjective perspective (**gender-sensitive work**)? Or is gender-reflective work also a vehicle to promote individual and social change processes towards more equality and gender justice (**gender-transformative work**)? There can be no conclusive answer to these questions, because the answer has a lot to do with what kind of men's counselling is involved, how this counselling is set up and how the people involved in the counselling relationship deal with them:

-
- What is the respective counselling context: men's counselling in the narrow or in the broad sense?
 - What is the time horizon of the counselling work: only a single or few sessions vs. longer-term support?
 - What are the underlying values of men's counselling in the relevant case?
 - What are the perspectives for change that the client is ultimately willing to accept?
-

However, in the context of gender-reflective men's counselling, professionals should always examine these questions for themselves and develop an attitude towards them. We can start from the assumption that value-neutral counselling work is not possible because it is always carried out against a value horizon of some kind. In this respect, it is important to be accountable for this fact and to deal with it consciously.

This can mean keeping the relationship between political and personal perspectives on change open and in balance:

»The hotspots of gender justice issues are also the problem areas with which our clients come to us. However, the focus is different, more subjective: clients want to be able to regulate their own violence and only secondarily want a world free of violence. The clients want to spend more time with their children and take more responsibility for them, and only then are they interested in the corresponding arrangements in our society.«

Bertsch/Christandl 2016, p. 132

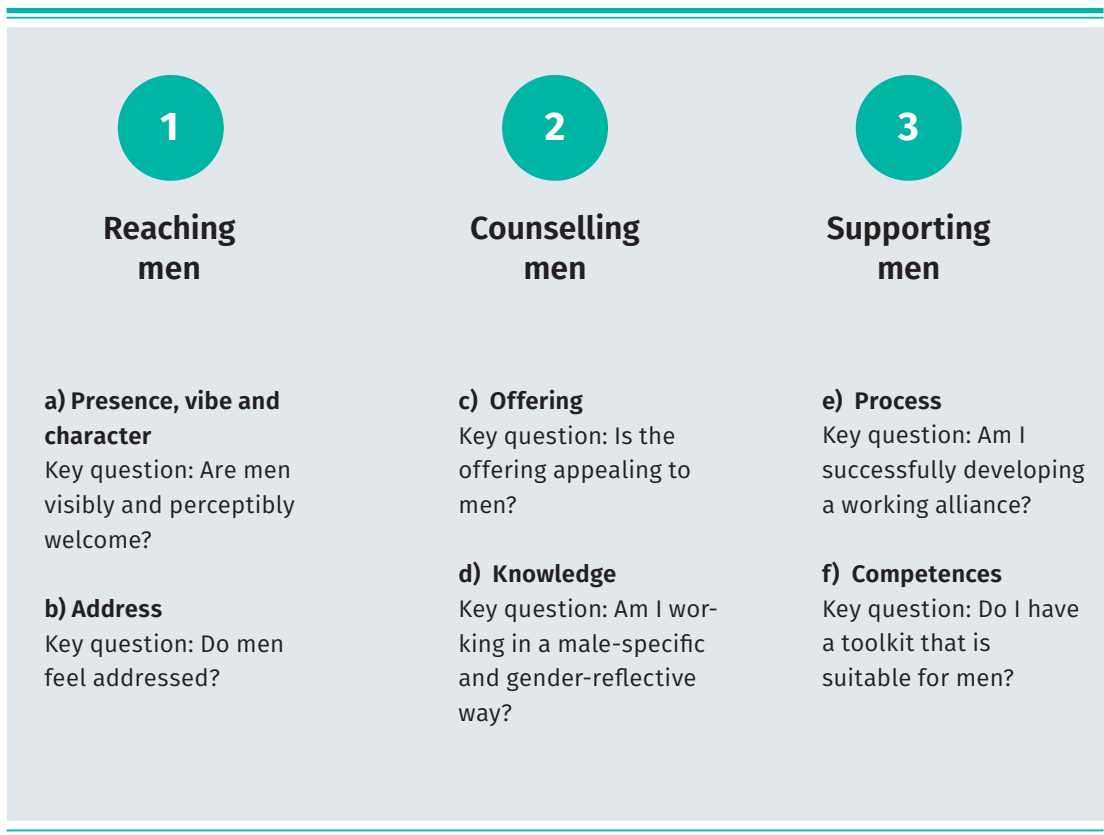
Alternatively, it can mean working towards and advocating for clients to adopt a politically normative perspective:

»In our work, we do not assume that men must be manoeuvred or tricked into a movement towards equality. That would be on the verge of manipulation. Rather, from our point of view, it is important to seek resonance with those personality traits in which the longing for a life beyond the prevailing norms of masculinity (...) is hidden. This is an emancipatory attitude, not a paternalistic one.«

Theunert/Luterbach 2021, S. 121

In the practice of counselling men, the following levels and guiding questions are helpful in order to systematically take into account the different aspects for reaching target groups and address-

ing them to the point of shaping relationships and methodological interventions in counselling and support (see Theunert 2021, p. 6):



3.2 The target group in focus

Reaching and addressing men

Many institutions in the field of psychosocial counselling or family education and counselling experience that their services are often much more in demand from and attended by women than by men, even though the services are declared to be gender-neutral and open to all. Even if specific services for men are developed and offered, demand is still limited. One reason for this is that the entire **professional field of psychosocial work** has historically been a female professional field. This bias is expressed not only in the fact that close to three quarters of workers in the field of social work are women (see Hammerschmidt et al. 2020). The way in which educational and counselling institutions visibly present themselves to the outside world and the image they convey overall can also be shaped, implicitly or explicitly, by ideas that tend to be attributed to a **culture with female connotations**. For example, this affects things such as the design of the premises, the colour scheme or the language used on websites, flyers, etc. – in other words, the overall self-presentation and its impression. The question in this context is whether the presence and character are suitable and appealing to men: encompassing relatively trivial aspects such as opening hours and the self-image, but also the experienced organisational culture and what is ex-

pressed therein (see Theunert 2021, p. 18ff; Schäfer/Schulte 2016, p. 73ff).

What is needed is a **low-threshold approach in order to reach more men and provide them** an attractive offering. »Who decides what the target group likes? Exactly: the target group itself!« (Theunert 2021: p. 22). At the same time, however, there is a difficulty associated with this method; this kind of **blanket approach** ignores the fact that men – as well as women, of course – are not a homogeneous group, but that different social categories always take effect at the same time (see Chapter 1.1 above). A low-threshold approach for men from the middle class with an educational background can mean high hurdles for men from other social milieus. Men with a migration background may encounter language and other cultural barriers. Furthermore, men who – in terms of equality policy – have already set out on their own path and are open to modern gender images may have different needs than those who persist in traditional thought patterns. In this respect, it is advisable in individual cases to critically question oneself again and again as to what effects one's own presence as an institution or as a provider of counselling is likely to have and what **inclusions** or **exclusions** are associated with it.

The criterion for success here is ultimately the practice itself. If men – or a targeted subgroup of men – are reached and accept the offering, something has clearly worked.

A **conscious use of language** is always recommended when addressing target groups. This applies equally to men and all other conceivable target groups. The decisive factor is the focus that is adopted and how consciously the associated assumptions and expectations are dealt with. The focus can be sharpened to various degrees, broadly or narrowly, and yet it will always exclude some perspectives. A decision for one perspective is at the same time the decision against another. In this respect, the same is also true here: **there is no magic formula for addressing »men«**. On the contrary, there is always the danger of falling back to stereotypes, reproducing common gender clichés and lumping all men together. It follows that in conceptual considerations for addressing the target group (men), one should consciously reflect on exactly which subgroup of men should be addressed, what suitable messages might be and what language is needed. Conversely, this does not mean that the approach cannot be directed at all men. However, one must then be aware of and deal with the fact that only a selection of men will ever be addressed.

The explanations in Chapter 2.4 on demands of masculinity and male socialisation have shown that there are **commonalities** that apply to men on average or in the majority; these can be used as a basis for addressing the target group. If it is also clear that these are generalised assumptions that do not automatically apply to all men and that individual deviations exist, such an approach may well be taken. Conscious use of language in this sense simply means keeping **both sides in balance**. The **overarching general case** forms the starting point as an assumption and heuristic process. In contrast are **special individual cases that deviate from the general case**; in such cases, attentiveness and recognition is needed. The following suggestions should be dealt with in this sense (see Schäfer/Schulte 2016, p. 74ff; Kassner 2019, p. 245f; Theunert 2021, p. 22ff).

Addressing men

- **Essentially, if one wants to address men, one should do so actively** and name them as a target group instead of just including them. For example, do not address parents in general, but mothers and fathers specifically.
 - **Objective topics, knowledge questions and information** are more suitable as an introduction; one should not focus too quickly and exclusively on one's own emotions or on relationship issues.
 - **Terminology from psychology and internal aspects** (feelings, weakness, failure, psychosocial counselling, sensing, feeling etc.) should be used carefully as they can lead to defensive reactions.
 - **Instead of addressing men in a problem- and deficit-oriented way** and emphasising the need for help, a positive, resource- and solution-oriented approach is needed.
 - **A forward-looking perspective that identifies concrete goals is recommended;** this perspective should take into consideration the steps and possible gains and should let men decide for themselves what they want to implement. Less suitable is a perspective that looks primarily backwards and inwards, where things are "talked to pieces". Likewise to be avoided are suggestions that can be experienced as patronising.
-
-

For many (heterosexual) men, their partners or other women in their close environment are often the only people with whom they talk in more detail about their inner feelings and their emotional state. They therefore serve an important function as bridge-builders for the utilisation of professional help, counselling and support services. This draws attention to the question of the **counsellor's gender**. In the field of men's counselling, the view exists that ultimately only men can counsel men. We do not share this view and assume that women can of course also counsel men. Against the background of the above considerations, this approach can even be used beneficially for counselling and can develop its own dynamic.

However, **female professionals** should pay special attention to possible projections and transferences. **Male professionals**, in contrast, have an edge over their female colleagues in that they share with their client the common experience of life and the world of »having to relate to demands of masculinity as a man« (Theunert 2021, p. 20; see also Chapter 2.4). This can be an advantage in counselling men, but is a resource that is available only to male counsellors. Ultimately, the gender of the counsellor is a significant factor one way or another. However, for a successful counselling process, it is probably far less decisive than the ability to establish a relationship, to make contact and to work in a gender-reflective way.

3.3 Shaping the client relationship

Counselling and supporting men

What exactly does it take to be able to create counselling processes that are gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented? This requires **knowledge and competences** that are condensed in a gender-reflective **attitude** and expressed in a corresponding approach and methodology that are applied in the counselling process.

A **basic understanding** of gender issues in general and of the demands of masculinity and male socialisation in particular is the foundation for being able to work with men in a gender-reflective way.

An overview was provided in Chapter 2.4 in order to raise awareness of related issues and arouse curiosity to learn more.

Depending on the field of counselling, this knowledge must be supplemented by further knowledge about **thematic basics** and the positioning of the worlds of male life and experience in that field. Below, some central topics are mentioned by way of example. In the appendix, we have compiled selected further references and recommended reading.

Central thematic areas in men's counselling

Fatherhood and family

Reconciliation of gainful employment and care work, gender-specific division of labour, couple and family dynamics, especially on the topic of separation and divorce.

Self-care and health

Psychological stress, dealing with performance requirements, competition, pressure, excessive demands and addictive behaviour.

Sexuality

Sexual health, sexual behaviour and dealing with sexual diversity.

Violence

Dealing with aggression, men as perpetrators, but also men's openness to vulnerability and male victims of abuse and violence.

Deviance and social situation

Deviant behaviour of men, experiences of failure and loss, disadvantages and social exclusion.

Flight, migration and integration

Experiences of migrant men in mainstream society, racism and cultural sensitivity.

For those who want to delve deeper into the matter of gender-reflective counselling work with men, two recommendations are the orientation framework for gender-reflective work with boys, men and fathers for professionals by Markus Theunert and Matthias Luterbach (Theunert/Luterbach 2021), as well as a brief hand-out for practice (Theunert 2021). The foundational work on working with men in the field of psychotherapy by Wolfgang Neumann and Björn Sürfke (2004) is also a valuable resource; much of it can also be used for the practice of counselling. We will take up both of them and go into more detail on central aspects.

Foundational works

Theory and practice of gender-reflective work with men

Neumann, Wolfgang / Sürfke, Björn (2004):

Den Mann zur Sprache bringen.
Psychotherapie mit Männern, Tübingen

Theunert / Luterbach (2021): Mann sein...!?

Geschlechterreflektiert mit Jungen, Männern und Vätern arbeiten.
Ein Orientierungsrahmen für Fachleute,
Weinheim / Basel

Theunert, Markus (2021). Männer erreichen, beraten, begleiten. Ein Leitfaden für die Praxis, Basel (available as a download; see also the bibliography)

In recent years, various **training opportunities** have also been developed to qualify professionals for men's counselling and to anchor gender-reflective work with boys, men and fathers more firmly in the practice of psychosocial work and counselling.

Training opportunities in the field of men's counselling

SKM Bundesverband

Training for multipliers in men-focused counselling

<https://echte-maenner-reden.de/profi-maenner-fokussierte-beratung/>[21/02/2022]

See also: Concept of boys' and men's counselling by SKM Bundesverband e.V., Düsseldorf 2020

www.skmev.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SKM-EMR-Konzeptpapier2020_web.pdf
[21/02/2022]

männer.ch

Course on men's work. Gender-reflective work with boys, men and fathers

www.maenner.ch/lehrgang-maennerarbeit/
[21/02/2022]

LAG Jungen- und Männerarbeit Sachsen

Advanced training in systemic men's counselling. One on one, between men

www.maennerberater-fortbildung.de/
[21/02/2022]

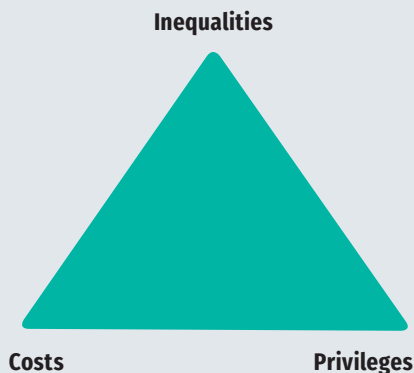
These resources offer a comprehensive opportunity to acquire theoretical and conceptual knowledge, a corresponding professional attitude and the practical skills for gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented counselling work.

In order to keep the hierarchical structure of the gender order and the involvement of men in it conceptually and theoretically present in counselling, **the triangle model of the politics of masculinities**, originally developed by the US sociologist Michael Messner for the field of gender policy, is useful (see Theunert 2021, p. 26f; Theunert/Luterbach 2021, p. 94f).

Traditional norms of masculinity are associated with privileges and gains, such as economic and political power. Nevertheless, there are costs, such as lower life expectancy and less integration into family and private life contexts. Since costs and privileges are by no means the same for all men, differences and inequalities within the group of men must also always be taken into account. In this way – in the sense of an empathetic or emancipatory attitude – the advantages of being a man can be critically discussed in a differentiated way and at the same time possible gains of a change in masculinity can be considered.

Theunert/Luterbach (2021) have expanded this approach in their orientation framework into a concept of **the triangle of development**. For them, gender-reflective work with men must be »equal and at the same time supportive, limiting and opening« (ibid., p. 100).

**Triangle model:
Terrain of the politics of masculinities**
according to Michael Messner



The aspect of support is first of all central to building a relationship in a counselling relationship and to understanding where the client currently stands and how he perceives himself and the world. **The aspect of limiting**, as part of gender-transformative work, is aimed at questioning the basic male privilege of being considered a self-evident norm and demanding a construc-

tive and fair way of dealing with existing male privileges. Finally, **the aspect of opening up** aims at development potentials and perspectives of a different masculinity beyond heteronormative constraints (Theunert 2021, p. 28).

This challenging and elaborate approach expresses a normative yet emancipatory attitude

The concept of the triangle of development			
	Supporting	Limiting	Opening up
Focus	Men as individuals in the field of tension of contradictory demands of masculinity	Men in society	Men in a holistic view
Professional attitude	Appreciating them, taking them seriously	Questioning self-evident (gender) facts, challenging the client sympathetically	Facilitating and accompanying reflection
Core process	Developing the client's relationship to his male self and the world in an empathetic and accepting way	Contextualising, marking and deprivileging	Questioning and exploring the world beyond binary and heteronormative gender structures

that aims at changing masculinity and gender relations in the context of counselling men. It corresponds to men's counselling in the narrow sense as described in Chapter 2.3. Within the framework of an **equality-oriented policy for boys, men and fathers**, as we pursue it at the Federal Forum for Men, we consider such a perspective to be politically imperative and see the equality policy potentials associated with men's counselling. At the same time, we are aware that such a perspective can almost never be implemented one-to-one in counselling processes with men in the broad sense, where men are counselled on specific issues and where masculinity itself is not primarily the subject of counselling. This is particularly true if the counselling is not designed for a longer process of support, but is limited to one or a few sessions.

As a common ground and starting point for gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented counselling work, it is essential to consider the two core messages of the theoretical foundations (Chapter 2.4) and to apply them in the **practical design of work with boys, men and fathers in counselling processes**:

- Men must – one way or another – position themselves according to demands of masculinity.
- Patterns of male socialisation are powerful and lead to specific principles for coping with being a man.

Essentially, it follows that counselling should not be putatively gender-neutral, but should consciously focus on the fact that the male client is in counselling as a man, regardless of the issues and concerns he brings. Masculinity itself does not necessarily have to become a topic, but with a gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented perspective, the focus changes. The question then is how counselling can be made male-specific and whether it is helpful for the counselling relationship and process to adopt such a focus. The repertoire of counselling methods and interventions used for this approach is not fundamentally different from what is normally used, but the attitude is different. In addition to the client's concerns, two questions arise on what can be seen as a second level: how do the demands of masculinity and the principles of coping with being a man develop relevance in the counselling relationship and whether and how attention to this promotes and enriches the counselling process.

Impulses for counselling practice

- For men, access is easier if the focus is on objective issues, knowledge and information – and not on men themselves.
- When working with men, it is important to build on the competences of men and to create familiar terrain.
- Traditionally socialised men must cope with three challenges in a counselling situation: 1) solving a problem, 2) talking about it, and 3) remaining a man. This is difficult and can quickly become too much for them.
- A smart male-oriented approach manages to square the circle: it picks up the target group in its suffering from the contradictory nature and inescapability of prevailing demands of masculinity without addressing them as victims.
- Counselling men also means finding a way to deal with this field of tension, to work on an objective issue in a solution-oriented way and at the same time to focus on the “whole” man (and not just his problem).
- Counselling men is quite simple. It is »merely« about accompanying men in learning to feel (again).

Based on Theunert 2021

Gender competence or masculinity competence thus becomes a **resource in its own right** in counselling activities. This does not mean all men should be approached in the same way in the sense of a gender stereotype. It means being open to how masculinity takes effect in specific individual cases and what procedures and interventions are needed to deal with it productively. On this basis, one's own counselling methods and competences can be examined and applied.⁶

To **shape the beginning** of a counselling relationship and establish contact, this means addressing the existence of male coping principles and to perceive them as such (see above regarding the aspect of supporting).

.....

⁶ The following information is based in particular on Neumann/Süfke 2004, p. 49ff; Theunert 2021, p. 25ff; Bertsch/Christandl 2016; Waidhofer 2016; SKM Bundesverband 2020.

This approach is about seeing what is there and accepting the other person in their essence. The **attitude** towards the male client as a person should be characterised by acceptance, appreciation and empathy, instead of using the negative and degrading images that exist in public perception, in which men are primarily portrayed as problematic and deficient.

Clarification of the issue should first take place close to the phenomena described, instead of hastily forming hypotheses and making generalisations with a view to masculinity. It makes sense to build on the existing competences of the other person, to build trust and to acknowledge existing problems and difficulties. It can also be helpful to remain at an objective level at first, instead of focusing too quickly on the relational level or one's own self. The point is to establish contact, to develop the contact and to strengthen the capacity of this contact only in further steps, if necessary.

Self-criticism is especially important when dealing with one's own ideals and **stereotypical generalisations and attributions**. These bear the danger of concealing reality. (Previous) assumptions about male and female characteristics and attributes influence a person's perception and evaluation and may not do justice to the specific individual case. However, with appropriate critical reflection such presuppositions can certainly be used as hypotheses or to address the problem of contradictions. Attention is needed when the client thinks in stereotypical categor-

ies or falls into general self-deprecation («all other men are ..., can ... etc., but not me«).

Separation of the person and the person's behaviour should also be part of the fundamental attitude of men's work, especially when men show transgressive behaviour or the work is explicitly about violent men. At the same time, it must be made clear that the responsibility for such behaviour lies entirely with the client, without condemning him as a person. The goal of counselling in this case is to work on changing one's own behaviour in order to deal with one's own limits and the limits of others in a respectful and responsible way. A **holistic view of the man** in his biographical and social integration can also open up broader perspectives for action and possible solutions beyond the narrow view of the formulated concern and problem.

Challenging male coping principles

1

Externalisation

Internalisation helps to break the patterns of external orientation in perception and action

2

Muteness

Invitation to new, more personal language; no right-wrong answers and no empty phrases, but real talking about the »how«

3

Solitude

The feeling of doing it alone (or having to do it alone); reflecting and supporting with attention

4

Rationality

Addressing internal reactions to external attributions; confronting the tendency to avoid ambiguity and open questions

5

Control

Taking fear of loss of control seriously and offering safeguards and ways to venture forward without control

6

Distancing from the body

Countering the functionalisation of one's own body; strengthening the perception of bodily sensations; perception of body language, body memory and bodily limits

7

Violence

Sensitive discussion of perpetrator and victim experiences; sensitisation to one's own feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, helplessness, weakness and fear; naming the vicious circle of violence; differentiation between destructive violent behaviour and positive aggressiveness; fair physical confrontation according to clear rules

In order to **deal with male coping principles** as they are expressed in the client's speech and interaction, the procedure of a »**loving confrontation**« (Süfke 2010, p. 169ff) is recommended; this approach maintains both a balance between an empathetic and appreciative view as well as the imposition of a critical confrontation. Such an attitude offers resonance, contributes oneself with one's own feelings and experiences as an authentic counterpart, establishes contact and a relationship and holds the frame. At the same time, however, it also mirrors and disrupts the client's speech patterns and normative self-understandings in order to challenge the client's tendencies towards externalisation and to facilitate and accompany inward openings.

Furthermore, non-verbal methods are also helpful in working with men when talking does not lead anywhere in the counselling process. Humour can be a door opener in shaping relationships; playful approaches can be a method extension and a conscious handling of competition and rivalry, which can also become relevant especially in the counselling relationship as behaviour patterns specific to men (see Theunert 2021, p. 32f). Last but not least, it is helpful if there is also the possibility in accompanying **intervision and supervision** to adopt a gender-reflective and male-oriented perspective and to be able to address and reflect on one's own counselling actions and case histories in this sense.

Five questions for critical self-reflection

1. Am I aware that there is no such thing as gender-neutral perception, thinking and action?
2. Do I reflect on my own impressions, gender stereotypes and values?
3. Do I have a benign and attentive view of men?
4. Do I have a concept of what »being a good man« could mean today?
5. Do I have an idea of how men can deal with their privileges in a differentiated way? Am I aware that not all privileges are individually changeable and that it is therefore necessary to have the competence to distinguish between changeable and unchangeable privileges?

See Theunert 2021, p. 30





Examples of good practice

For this chapter, we have conducted interviews with practitioners from different fields in order to show the substantive range of men's counselling and to acknowledge practical experiences.

4.1 Counselling as a part of stabilising efforts

Men and violence

MUT-Traumahilfe für Männer*
[trauma support for men], Berlin

»In many cases, we are the first to be told the sexualised violence they have experienced.«

Interview with Markus Wickert,
Trauma counsellor, trauma educator
and gender trainer

What counselling do you offer and who comes to see you?

We provide counselling for men who have experienced sexualised violence in their lives. It is very important to understand that this refers to any form of sexual activity that was carried out against the wishes of the boy or man concerned. Our centre is located in Berlin-Neukölln. But men from all over Berlin come to us. Our colleagues from »Berliner Jungs« [Berlin Boys] work in this field for boys and male youths. It might be interesting to know that we also offer counselling for male refugees.

In which setting does the counselling take place?

As a rule, we offer one-on-one counselling. Confidants can also be included, however. Overall, we are strongly oriented towards the individual needs of the men who come to us. Most of the counselling takes place at our counselling centre. However, we also offer mobile counselling. We have found that some men find it easier to talk to each other while taking a walk.

How would you describe the men who come to you? Is it a particular group of men?

The men who come to us reflect all of society. Sexualised violence occurs in all classes. What they all have in common is the desire to find a constructive way to deal with their trauma – to learn to live well with what happened to them. What is needed individually for this, however, is very diverse.

What common problems do you see in the men who come for counselling? What do the men themselves see?

Very often, these men suffer from psychosomatic symptoms such as insomnia, inner restlessness, concentration problems and other post-traumatic stress disorders. How do the men see themselves? A bit helpless, looking for support to find their way out of the dead ends they have experienced. Many of the people who

come to us for advice relate their issues and challenges directly to what they experienced in childhood, adolescence and/or adulthood. They have an idea about it, but often reach their limits as far as their own ability to act. In many cases, we, the counsellors*, are the first people who are told the sexualised violence they have experienced.

Do you think that you or your counselling centre works with a gender- or masculinity-reflective concept? If so, what does this look like and what experiences have you had with it? If not, do you think that this could be helpful in your work?

This cannot be understood in the sense of a clear concept that would frame all our counselling work. I think that counselling as we offer it is first and foremost about stabilising men. Just by doing this as male counsellors, we destabilise a stereotype of masculinity according to which men are not allowed or able to be empathetic and show solidarity.

How are difficult issues dealt with in the team?

Professional counselling, especially in such a highly sensitive field, cannot be done without internal reflection and external support. This is essential, also in the sense of self-protection, because sometimes really dramatic biographies become visible, which we as counsellors also have to deal with somehow – despite all the professional distance we keep. Nevertheless, stabilisation work, as we understand it, means that we always have to get involved to a certain extent in order to build up a certain closeness and trust. This is why we need reliable support in the team and external supervision.

What is the basis for your counselling work?

Our work is financed by the Berlin Senate.

4.2 Counselling as reintegration support

Men released from custody

FrauenComputerZentrumBerlin

Project MUNIA – Mentoring and networking
for integration into the labour market

**»The aim of our counselling is
empowerment.«**

Interview with Ruth Warkentin
Sociologist and social pedagogue

What was Project MUNIA about?

In the project, men between the ages of 18 and 35 who had been released from prison and were under parole supervision were accompanied in their reintegration into the labour market. Gainful employment is central to the self-image of young men when they are released from prison. Apart from money, above all a job means daily structure. You have to consider that they were embedded in a totally organised process for years due to their imprisonment. I also call this structure an »exoskeleton« in order to make clear how essential this externally determined order is for these men.

How would you describe the group with which you worked?

Most of the men are between their mid-twenties to early thirties and have served several years. Their formal education is significantly below the average for the population as a whole. Many dropped out after eighth or ninth grade or left school early. But some also have high school diplomas. Most of the young men have a migrant background. Those who came to us had a particularly good prognosis; they could really make a new start after prison.

Regarding your work counselling and supporting ex-prisoners: does gender play a role?

What is the significance of the fact that they were men?

Masculinity is very central. Around 95% of offenders are men. The reasons for imprisonment reflect a certain form of male self-image. In the project we gained a lot of experiential knowledge about masculinity. Unfortunately, there was no curriculum. An »ABC guide to masculinity« would certainly have been helpful for our work.

In what framework does or did your counselling work take place?

We are part of the penal system and work closely with the Berlin prisons. Men with a good reintegration prognosis are sent to us. We support the men in their transition from prison to a free life. A few need only one appointment for information. Others we accompany for three years. Our counselling is embedded in social work support and the aim is empowerment. Initial talks take place while the prisoners are still in custody. Some of them take place on site, others take place with us as part of their release. However, the main focus is post-imprisonment support.

So, you support the men coming out of prison in reintegrating into the social fabric of society?

Yes, if they make it clear that they really want to make a serious attempt to shape their lives differently. Our goal is to give the men a realistic perspective of a law-abiding life. Often, they first have to learn to recognise the prevailing limits and understand that their normal expectations do not correspond to the expectations of the general public. Many of those we deal with always wanted to make a quick buck. This led to delinquency and eventually imprisonment. We deal with young men who spend half a million euros a month on cars, partying, women and drugs before their court sentence. That is their expectation of normality. When we ask,

»How much do you want to earn a month?« they say, »At least 10,000 euros net.« Some have not completed their education or taken any training, and some are illiterate. To make matters worse, many of the men do not have a work permit because of their residence status. This means they have to get by on 346 euros. The Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act does not allow more. The only way to get more money is illegally, through drug dealing or undeclared work. A vicious circle that goes well with their self-images as men. Disobeying rules and violating boundaries marks them out as particularly masculine in their eyes. Imprisonment often makes the ideas of masculinity even more rigid and narrow. But I have to say clearly that we do not proselytise the men. We provoke, prompt and even confront them; these can be painful processes for them. They have to realise for themselves that money is not everything in life. In the end, they have to find and go their own way.

Counselling in this context is certainly stressful. What is the significance of the supervision or intervention that helps to deal with this?

We always engaged in very intensive reflection in the team. In the individual case discussion, the level of masculinity was discussed over and over again. This discussion was very important. This was not intervention, but the role of the team is immensely important. We go alone to the detention centres and to appointments. The experiences and fates of the men we hear about are often very demanding. We need the team to support and reassure us. Therefore, accompanying supervision is indispensable. Professional counselling and support are not possible without external support – even if the funding bodies unfortunately do not always see it that way.

The project could not be continued. Yet the work is obviously extremely important. How did this happen?

Overall, offenders are perceived as the »bad guys« for whom funds and resources are reluctantly made available. They are not perceived as people with problems. Society has to ask itself: who do we want to deal with after prison? Because everyone gets out of prison at some point. How should this work? To put it in somewhat emotional terms: a little more love is also needed for these men – because despite all the responsibility for their own decisions that ultimately led to their delinquency, society cannot simply repress its responsibility.

4.3 Questions about sexuality

Men in sexual counselling

profamilia counselling centre, Berlin

»Ultimately, counselling is about the attitude with which I approach someone.«

Interview with Andreas Ritter

Social pedagogue, systemic therapist and sex educator

On which topics do you offer counselling and what are you responsible for?

There are different areas at profamilia. One is sexual education and counselling. My job is to advise adolescents and young adults up to the age of 25 on all topics related to sexuality. This can take the form of classical sex education. The older the clients get, the more this also moves towards sexual counselling, for example on sexual disorders. There is the area of pregnancy conflict counselling, where I also give advice. Of course, men also come here, mostly together as a couple. I also have men alone in counselling from time to time, for example when there are different opinions. Sometimes this is follow-up counselling, when a man comes and says that I was much more affected than I had expected, I needed support. In addition, there is further

training for educational staff on the topic of sexuality. There are also events for young people and also for young adults in the area of sexual education.

Do you work with both women as well as with men? How does that work specifically?

That depends on the situation. In sex education and sexual counselling, there is a clear focus on boys and men, so I take on male clients. They can usually choose what they want. Sometimes, however, a woman or a girl comes to me because I'm available at the moment and maybe it's just for questions about contraceptives or something. But if a man comes in with erection problems, he usually wants to talk to a man in counselling. The approaches are different – with referrals from others, the Internet or social media. There is an initial discussion to clarify the purpose of the counselling. What is the issue or problem? Are there already possible solutions? We don't do therapy; it's counselling and it's usually limited to ten appointments. If necessary, we can of course make referrals.

What are the individual topics?

The topics can be very different; in sexual counselling, for example, one issue is the fear of being addicted to sex or pornography. Insecurities caused by pornography is another. With adolescents, one or two appointments are often enough to clarify the questions and to compare their own images and expectations with external demands and expectations from others. With young adults, especially when it comes to sexual disorders, more time is needed. What exactly is going on? What are their biographical experiences? What have they learned about sexuality? What messages have they received from their parents, etc.? Moreover, what does this have to do with masculinity? What kind of performance do I supposedly have to deliver? And what do I actually want myself, beyond the learned social expectations? Viewed from an overall perspective, however, the topics are not necessarily typically male or female. In the end, it's more about how secure or insecure am I? What about trust in relation to sexuality? And finally: what is good for me and what is not? Do I have an idea about this topic or can I develop it? How do I want to live my sexuality as a person, what do I feel like doing, what don't I feel like doing?

Who comes to you for counselling – especially on the part of young men? Can you say something general about this?

Of course, the men are united by the fact that they see counselling as something helpful and get involved in it. There are a large number of men and boys who do not see counselling as helpful at first and say: »No, I'm not in the mood for that kind of talk.« So, there is a certain selection of men who come. Counselling is not necessarily right for everyone. Naturally, I believe that what I do is helpful. But I wouldn't say that it is automatically helpful for all people. Ultimately, counselling is about the attitude with which I approach someone so that they feel valued. It's about being in contact and providing the framework in which helpful ideas can emerge. That is the point where all people feel supported – men included. Many of the boys and men who come to me for counselling are often pretty tough. The way they go through their programme, even with problems. This is a specifically male issue: performance and achievement. Images of masculinity are always involved, even if they are not expressed as such. I don't think it's always helpful in counselling to label it as such explicitly. You need the competence to handle it appropriately in each situation. This is already connected to the field of sex education and counselling. You

simply need a feel for gender issues. This is an expectation at profamilia, that a critical examination has taken place.

How does this compare to pregnancy conflict counselling?

The most important difference is that men mostly come here in couples and a central question is how they feel heard in counselling. Are they only accompanying their partner and is it actually about the partner or are they a key part of this counselling? In the end, the most frequent theme in a conflict is helplessness or powerlessness on the part of the men, when the decision ultimately lies with the woman. In the follow-up counselling for men, it is often also about the consequences for their lives and the couple relationship and how they deal with it emotionally. This is also a lot about control and self-efficacy or about being overwhelmed or about grief.

How do you feel about it – surely it is more expected that a woman does the pregnancy conflict counselling?

First of all, clients can end up with a man or a woman, but it is discussed again. Certainly, there are some who say, »I don't want to go to counselling with a man.« This is not the case the other way around. In this context, it would be good to be able to provide counselling in a mixed setting in twos, but unfortunately, we can't do that because of our capacity. However, there are men, for example, who would like to talk to a man again. Then we make another separate appointment. If necessary, the colleague can also talk to the partner alone. This is pregnancy conflict counselling in a nutshell.

4.4 Men and equality

Men's counselling in a municipal equal opportunity office

Equal Opportunities Office of the City of Nuremberg

»I often hear: »This is the first time that someone has listened to me for so long.«

Interview with Matthias Becker

Social pedagogue, boys', men's and fathers' counsellor, contact partner for men

How did it come about that the Equal Opportunities Office of the City of Nuremberg created the position of a contact partner for men and what tasks are associated with this job?

The position has existed since 2016 and initially started as a model project. At that time, the question for the women's and equal opportunities officer and then also for the city council was: how can men actually be reached for equal opportunities work? The experience was that men do not turn to the female equal opportunities officer, even though the wording is about equality between women and men. To be sure, it was highly controversial politically to bring a man onto the team, and there were concerns that the patriarchy would be strengthened with men's issues and that this would be to the detriment of women. The equal opportunities officer

had reduced her hours for reasons of compatibility with personal life and this share of the workload could then be used for the project. So, I started with seven hours a week. I still faced many obstacles based on the preconception: »Men don't have problems, they cause problems. And if they do have problems, they don't talk about them.« At the same time there was scientific support, which evaluated the project positively and worked out the needs of men. The experience and knowledge gained in the project also helped to dispel concerns. From 2018 onwards, a part-time position was created for me. Of course, this also generated a lot of media attention. Now I work quite regularly according to the provisions of the Equal Opportunities Act with a view to men, ultimately to break down gender stereotypes and to look at structures overall. For example, men in social work, health and care jobs in the urban context. I also work in counselling and supporting men in their concerns and issues with which they come to us.

What sort of men come for counselling and what are their issues?

Men who work for the City of Nuremberg or who live in Nuremberg can come to me. The requests for counselling always increase when I am in the public eye as a contact partner for men with topics such as men's health, fatherhood and reconciling different areas of life, separation or male victims of sexual abuse or domestic vio-

lence. This means that the needs are there and then it becomes clear that there is a contact point or a counterpart where the men can turn to. The first contact is usually by email or telephone or via the contact form. In the meantime, however, I have also had a few cases where I have received a referral. First of all, we have to clarify the issue of confidentiality, because this is perhaps a different issue at a municipal office than at other counselling centres. I have already mentioned some of the topics covered. A good number of the enquiries are about becoming a father and being a father. Topics include parental allowance, parental leave, substitution arrangements and so on. In the case of separation, there are highly complex and difficult questions about custody, contact and maintenance, also connected with psychosocial support. In these cases, I also engage with our youth welfare office. Another part is always the topic of sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence and the associated consequences. Another issue is violence and suffering from domestic violence. For example, we might address sexual harassment and bullying at the workplace. These are of course topics that are still partly taboo and where it is also important to look at individual cases without bias and to sensitise people to the fact that men can also be affected.

How does counselling work in concrete terms – what does it take to counsel men?

Sometimes counselling is rather brief and thematic, to provide information or to refer to other agencies if necessary. There are longer-term counselling sessions, on issues such as separation, sexual abuse or domestic violence. I can't do all that myself, even professionally. I work more or less mobile, serving as a first step and then accompanying a person to see together where they can turn to in order to work through an issue for themselves, including with therapy. Fortunately, the counselling landscape is slowly changing so that there is increasingly a referral structure for men, but it is still too little. In my counselling sessions, I often hear the following feedback: »This is the first time that someone has listened to me for so long and I have the feeling that I am being understood.« Of course, the counselling setting is very important and must be combined with an attitude of empathy and openness. A counsellor needs gender competence. For me, this consists of both knowledge about male topics, backgrounds or male socialisation as well as a sensitivity to be able to apply this knowledge in the counselling process: when to ask questions, where to show understanding and when to sometimes ask critical questions. In this protected setting, from man to man, many things are possible and I can sometimes also name things more openly and confrontationally, where a colleague might tell me that she would not have dared to talk like that. Ultimately, counselling is about listening

and giving the clients the space to talk. It is also about sorting out what we have heard and prioritising it together for further counselling work.

What else can be said about counselling men as part of your work in a municipal equal opportunities office?

Ultimately, I don't have a standard case in my everyday counselling work and I always have to decide as necessary what might be the further steps. Therefore, I consider when an initial counselling session might be sufficient or when to make several appointments and I can continue to accompany the process, including when it comes to implementation processes. I need to decide when to refer a client to other counselling and therapy contexts, as far as this is necessary and the referral structures even exist. However, I am quite well positioned with contacts as part of the Equality Opportunities Office. Within the municipal structure with links to the various offices, I also have ways I can take action. As a staff unit, we are located directly

under the Lord Mayor. I am not bound by any lengthy official channels. In general, our example here at the municipal Equal Opportunities Office in Nuremberg could set a precedent and be a model for other municipalities to establish a low-threshold, free counselling service for men as comprehensively as possible. This also opens up the possibility for women and men to have a good exchange and to complement each other. I experience this here with my female colleagues as very beneficial. In the end, successful gender equality, which is really aimed at women and men, can only be achieved together.

4.5 Pregnancy and partnership

Men in family-related counselling contexts

**Diakonie Rostocker Stadtmission e. V.
Integrated Psychological Counselling
Centre**

»It's great to see that more men are finding their way to counselling with their concerns.«

**Interview with Miriam Scharnweber
and Britta Braun**

Social education workers and counsellors

On which topics do you offer counselling and what does that mean specifically with regard to men as clientele?

We have different areas of counselling in our centre. First, there is pregnancy and pregnancy conflict counselling, where we have a legal mandate. In addition to the topics of unwanted pregnancy, crises during pregnancy and birth, confidential birth or abortion, this also includes questions about contraception, family planning and the unfulfilled desire to have children. Men and fathers naturally also have a special role to play in many of these issues. In counselling,

they are usually not the person who makes the final decision. Of course, they have their own expectations and ideas, which also have to be made visible. But in the end, it is often a question of supporting the woman's decision and finding one's own way of dealing with it, including the consequences for oneself. This has to be discussed well with each other and it requires an empathetic view of the feelings of powerlessness that are associated with it.

The situation is different when it comes to counselling on the topics of parental leave and parental allowance or on the topic of mother or father-child therapy, for which we also provide counselling. In this case, we experience that fathers accept the counselling well and that the demand is much higher than it was ten or 15 years ago. In addition, we are active in the entire field of educational and family counselling according to German Social Code Book 8, i.e. counselling on partnership, separation, divorce and contact, as well as educational counselling. Finally, there is the area of general social counselling and life counselling.

What is the counselling like in concrete terms?

When a client asks us for counselling, we usually sort out what the counselling concerns are in the first meeting, and then we assign the client accordingly. In parenting and family counselling, a large part is now separation and access counselling. Again, the question is what role mothers and fathers play in this context, and our task is to first look together at what is going on and what the different perspectives are. To do this, we work in different settings. We have had good experience with starting in individual settings, either with the mother or the father, and then moving on from there.

However, co-counselling in pairs, preferably mixed-gender, is something that we are unable to offer for capacity reasons; certainly, a male colleague would be desirable, but unfortunately, we don't have a male counsellor at our centre. This is in part because we only have part-time positions due to the funding. For many of our female colleagues, this is fine as they don't want to work full time. However, male colleagues, while they were present at one time, have since moved on. This is a basic structural problem that many counselling centres have.

Are there special topics that women or men tend to broach?

That can't be answered so clearly. Moreover, we don't document that for every case. In the end, many of the concerns are relationship issues and there is really no difference. In parenting counselling, the initial contact is perhaps somewhat more often with the mothers. In separation and access counselling, it is more with fathers. Those who have little or no contact with the child are more likely to take the initiative. In parental leave and parental allowance counselling, on the other hand, many fathers come quite naturally and state that they want to be more involved in the family. That's great to see and a difference from the past. It is not a deterrent that we are also a pregnancy conflict counselling centre. With parental allowance, too, there is of course the question of what is considered normal. Many mothers naturally assume that they will take 12 months of parental allowance and stay with the child for that time. If fathers then want to take more than just two months, they also need support or partners who are willing to give up some of their months.

How is the work with men in counselling? Is it different from women or is there no difference?

The first meeting is about finding out what the issues and concerns are; it is also an opportunity to establish initial contact with the other person. This is no different with men than with women. There is probably still a difference, simply because I'm a woman sitting opposite a man. In separation counselling, when conflicts are deadlocked, I experience fathers who are difficult to reach and first have to be won over for counselling. This kind of attitude – »I can manage on my own, I don't need any help« – also exists among mothers, but it is more common among a certain kind of man. Some men have no tangible need for advice at first. If they could be fathers the way they imagine it, there would be no problems for them. In couples counselling, in contrast, we sometimes observe a kind of self-assessment on the part of the men, along the lines of: »I'm not good at talking about feelings, my partner is better at it.« Even so, maybe it is sometimes an advantage to advise a man as a woman, because some of the male experiences of life are unfamiliar and that sharpens the senses in the conversation. This is unlike the situation with women, where there is sometimes the danger of over-identification on the part of the counsellor. Many men, especially in individual counselling, benefit from this openness and empathy. It is a very valuable experience for them and it also shows a longing or a need. Perhaps for one man or another, the threshold is lower when they sit opposite a female counsellor.

So, sometimes distance is good, sometimes closeness is better. It is more important to notice what is needed at the moment; can I offer and provide this as a counsellor? This also goes for gender. Is this an accurate summary?

Yes, exactly. But our discussion also showed that it is good to discuss these questions and to be aware of one's own patterns and self-understandings again and again. In retrospect: much has changed and it is great to see that more men are finding their way to counselling with their issues and concerns. It is also much more self-evident that fathers too are present in the everyday life of the family and feel a sense of responsibility.

4.6 Prevention and limitation

Men in violence counselling

SKM Bundesverband, Düsseldorf
The »Real men talk« programme

»We encourage men to take their emotional states seriously.«

Interview with Rüdiger Jähne
Social worker and consultant for work with boys and men

What is your first thought on the subject of offender work?

We talk about this topic with great sensitivity. I believe that the term »offender work« or »offender counselling« has the potential to create false images and to simplify the discourse. In counselling, it quickly becomes clear that no one is simply a perpetrator; it is always an expression of being overwhelmed, helplessness and despair. Our topic addresses boundaries and transgressions. It is important to ask ourselves what image we actually have of men: our image both of men who commit violence and men who seek help.

Who attends the counselling?

Men from all social and socio-economic backgrounds come to us. We deal with teachers, social workers, lawyers, tradesmen, the unemployed – in other words, the entire spectrum.

About one third of the men come through the conventional channel: by order from the public prosecutor's office or the youth welfare offices. Two thirds of the men, and we are quite proud of this, come from recommendations or on their own accord. That means they take the initiative and say, for example, »I have a problem, my children are afraid of me because I am always under so much pressure and I notice how my relationship with my wife suffers. I can't cope anymore.«

What else do these men tell you?

I often hear the sentence: »I've never talked to anyone about this before.« Sometimes, without minimising it, these are topics that seem trivial to me at first. However, this also makes clear the dimension of how blatant it actually is that men do not have anyone to talk to, even for apparently mundane topics, among their friends and acquaintances or at work, or they simply do not dare to talk about it because they are ashamed.

Do you have examples of the underlying problems or issues that the men experience?

A central theme is indeed loneliness. It is typical for men, also because it is socially expected that they invest in their career and work. However, despite seemingly objective successes («I am in a relationship, I have children, I work, I earn good money»), many realise how lonely they are and that they no longer have friendships, for example, because there is no time for them. Other topics are self-care and relationships, i.e. the relationships at work, in the team, with their children, with their partner.

How long does counselling take?

Change takes time. It often takes six to nine months with regular appointments to see what the issue is all about. What conflicts lie behind it, what functions the violence has. It is clear to most men that a situation of violence is a bad place to be. Many men do not understand themselves and then come to the point that they cannot name what is happening to them. Some are deeply ashamed of what they do and have done. Counselling is then about finding alternative courses of action together. The experience of violence in particular, which has already been well researched, is that the dynamics of violence can hardly be interrupted without external intervention, but are repeated again and again in a similar dynamic.

Are there goals in counselling?

Among other aspects, the aim is about promoting communication, relationship skills, introspection and reflection among the men; it is also about addressing the men with a clear attitude and confronting them very clearly about the things they do, without necessarily judging them. The central goal is for them to take responsibility for their own actions.

Can you describe this attitude you are talking about in more detail?

Well, I think empathy and confrontation are both very central aspects. We encourage men to take their feelings seriously. If they burst into tears here, that's not only okay, it's even desired: it helps them to get to the bottom of their sadness or disappointment. The confrontational part is especially important in the context of transgressing boundaries and violence. It is about professional distance, i.e. being very close to the men with a professional attitude and then also saying very clearly: »When I hear how much alcohol you drink on weekends, I really worry about you.« Without this confrontational part, I don't know if sometimes we don't just encourage behaviours that we actually want to change.

Who are the counsellors in the „Real men talk» network?

The counsellors in our network are trained social workers and education workers; they have all undergone further training specific to violence and men. That is a prerequisite. The reason is also to protect the counsellors to a certain extent – because anyone who deals with violence and transgressive people needs a clear attitude, a good set of methods and good tools.

Does it make a difference whether a man or a woman sits in front of the client as a counsellor?

I think that can become a central question, but not in the sense of better or worse. With our clients, transference and judging take place and then one might hear: »Yeah, but you're a woman, you can't understand this.« Male counsellors have the advantage that they can say: »I'm also a man and I'm also socialised as a man.« Basically, however, it is important for me to say that women can also provide successful men's counselling.

If a counsellor is interested and wants to become part of the network, how does that work?

The basic prerequisite is that the person declares a willingness to undergo further training in this specific context and to actively participate in the network. That has been a hurdle for many so far. That is why we have now launched the further training concept »Men-focused counselling«, where we provide further training ourselves in order to expand counselling skills.

What problems persist in the counselling of men?

I would like to see more men in the social sector, as men working for men. However, my clear appeal to politicians is basically that the appreciation and remuneration of this important, valuable work that social workers do in order to enable good coexistence must improve. Through preventive work, counselling and support, we prevent many problem situations and consequential costs that arise from transgressive behaviour. I would really like to see more recognition and financial support for this.

4.7 Health protection in the workplace

Counselling on mental stress

Blaufeuer Counselling Centre, Berlin

»It's often about social conflicts in the work context.«

Interview with Alfred Heitmann

Social worker, social pedagogue and case manager

What counselling services does Blaufeuer offer?

People between the ages of 18 and 64 who are employed and feel mentally stressed in some way can come to us for counselling. No diagnosis is required; the subjective feeling of being mentally stressed is enough.

Can you say something about the professional background of the people who come for counselling?

That varies a bit from region to region. As far as employment is concerned, we have traditional employees, but also some civil servants or self-employed people. Our clients come from administration, industry, the service sector as well as the social and medical sectors. In Berlin,

we have a large number of academics, but also classic tradespeople and commercial trainees. I count fewer unskilled workers at the moment, but that can of course change depending on how our offer spreads and becomes known.

Do men also come to you for counselling?

Currently, I would say that more women than men come to counselling.

With which topics and concerns do the clients come?

They often come with concerns about social conflicts in the work context. The topic of bullying or particular problems with bosses or staff is common. Of course, there is the issue of overwork or excessive workload. Often, private problems are also involved, such as the double burden of work and family or care at home. The situation during the coronavirus pandemic with working from home and home-schooling has intensified this. Stresses and impairments at work can also be caused by certain pre-existing conditions, including depression, burnout, ADHD or trauma.

We have cases that come to us relatively early, where I would say that the degree of stress is not yet so great. However, that is more the ex-

ception. A large number of clients come to us already with very serious and complex stress situations.

Do you also receive enquiries from companies or HR departments?

There are employers who are quite open to this, for example within the framework of company health management. However, the question of how to deal with illness in a professional context comes up again and again on the part of our clients – especially when it comes to mental health issues. The question is whether to be transparent with an employer and colleagues or to keep quiet about it. Mental illnesses are still a taboo subject. It is much easier to talk about back problems, for example, and to deal with them openly. But if I'm depressed or exhausted, that's a different matter.

What do you advise clients to do about this question? Should I tell my boss about my stress?

The answer really depends on the individual case and the nature of the contact with the supervisor and colleagues. It also very much depends on the personality of the client. We examine each individual case, take a close look at the client's living environment and working circumstances, and consider together what makes sense. This has a lot to do with trust and what it means to open up. In the worst case, this can also have employment consequences.

What kind of feedback do you get from your clients?

We hear again and again that many find it a great relief to speak out about their stress. In counselling, they don't have to worry that there will be any negative consequences or that it will put too much strain on family, friends or whomever. The neutral environment helps them to sort themselves out and find solutions by talking and asking questions.

What might such solutions look like?

We provide support, for example, when starting outpatient psychotherapy or rehabilitation services; we also help with filling out applications if necessary or refer a client to other specialised agencies. We also accompany our clients to external appointments with authorities. If a client wishes, we can also be present as a confidant at meetings within the framework of occupational integration management. Of course, building up a relationship with the client is crucial. Our counselling is very much based on a good relationship and trust.

Do gender-reflective approaches and concepts play a role in your counselling work?

I think gender-sensitive work is really important – especially with regard to vigilance against gender stereotypes. Conceptually, this is not yet anchored in our work. Of course, this also has a lot to do with the fact that we are a new project in the making. However, we have also noticed that there are still relatively few counselling services specifically for men. Especially in vocational coaching, offers for men are rather rare.

4.8 Gender-reflective coaching

Men's counselling in private practice

Gestalt Counselling – Coaching, Detmold

»I look at what ideas of masculinity the men themselves have.«

Interview with Andreas Haase
Counsellor for men and coach

What counselling for men do you offer and who comes to you?

I offer individual men's counselling. Elements from coaching to Gestalt therapy are included. I discuss with the men how we can proceed together. I counsel young men from 18 up to men over 60; these tend to be men from the middle class, because they usually pay for the counselling themselves.

What are the concerns that men come to you with? Could you name three typical cases and one outlier?

The men come with issues from childhood or an acute life crisis such as loss of job, burnout, dealing with their children or crisis/separation

in a partnership. Other topics include violence, in a domestic context or against sexual self-determination. One typical case is certainly the question of a successful partnership. It's about communication, interaction, personal hurts and grievances. Another topic addresses the question of being a father, also in different family arrangements and patchwork families. My counselling is also often about career perspectives. One thematic outlier is a sex offender who wants to find out why this happened to him and how he can change.

When men come with an explicit question like »Am I still in the right job?«, aren't there often other problems behind the issue?

There are men who stay very close to the relevant topic because it's only about that. Then there are men who say that they are not doing so well at the moment and then have different challenges to address, such as their partnership or work. There are also issues where it is about encouraging men to express themselves with their wishes and needs. I experience that men often find it difficult to feel their needs at all, and then they cannot express them clearly to their partner, children or in their professional life. For example, if a man says, »I am dissatisfied«, I ask what the underlying feeling is. Many people find it incredibly difficult to describe this feeling and also to feel it out of fear, sadness, disappointment or hurt.

How can you tell if counselling is on the right track?

An important criterion for me is the nature of my interaction with the man. That is something I can address: if communication is difficult at the moment, it sometimes works like a door opener. I can assume that when the client is in contact with me, he also manages to get in touch with his environment, with his wife, colleagues or friends.

You also do couples' counselling. Are men affected differently in couple conflicts and do they come with different issues than women?

Among the couples, I see a clear difference in the way they look at problems and the supposed solutions. With the men, I clearly see a solution orientation, while women often emphasise more that they are primarily concerned with the contact with their male partners. It is above all a matter of seeing these different approaches, attitudes and feelings that lie behind them and to appreciate and respect them more for each other.

Which masculinity-reflecting concept do you work with and how does masculinity become a topic?

The notion of hegemonic masculinity, as described by Raewyn Connell, provides my conceptual background. However, this plays only a negligible role in the counselling sessions themselves. I look at what ideas of masculinity the men themselves have and how this works in their family, office or circle of friends. I try to see their image of masculinity in a non-judgemental way. »How did you learn to be a man?« »How do you do it, being a father?« »Where did you copy it from?« »Who was a role model for you?« Then it becomes clear that sometimes it was the father that a man is emulating or perhaps he wants to do it the other way around. An example I can give – and this is often new for many men – is that a man sits across from them who is really listening, does not disapprove of them and accepts them as they are. That is my way of being in good contact with them and their ideas of masculinity, to feel more related to each other and to deal with them with fondness, even critically, but in a benign sense.

What qualities and standards do you think are needed in men's counselling?

Especially when it comes to violations of gender roles, counsellors need to reflect on their own gender images. What are our own assumptions when we go into counselling? We have to be careful not to put our foot in our mouth. Counsellors need to be honest with themselves, for example, we need to be able to admit that something has just touched us emotionally. I believe that dealing with oneself – as a man in this society – is important. Where do I stand? How do I live my masculinity? What are my images of masculinity? What is my approach to other men and how do I get in touch with them? These are questions that counsellors should clarify for themselves within the framework of training, collegial processes and supervision. This also includes an intellectual examination of texts. There also needs to be an exchange on the political level: which images/values of masculinity do I consider meaningful, which ones are having more of an impact on society again, for example, among the right wing?

How well is the counselling landscape doing with a sensitive view of men? Are we still at the very beginning or is there already good male-sensitive counselling?

We are certainly still at the beginning. However, I believe that the discussion about gender has already moved significantly, even among young colleagues. I experience that counselling centres refer men to specific counselling centres for men for some male-related issues instead of taking over the counselling themselves. Issues such as violence, masculinity issues or sexuality are examples. On the positive side, however, it is definitely a sign that they have counselling centres for men on their radar as professionally competent.

The background features a dark blue field on the left and a teal field on the right. Large, overlapping shapes in both colors are present, including a large teal shape on the right and a dark blue shape at the bottom right. The text is centered in the white space between the teal and dark blue areas.

Afterword and outlook



Afterword and outlook

Dr. Dag Schölper

Managing Director of the Federal Forum for Men

In men's counselling, the gender of the client is always relevant – as is the gender of the counsellor. This has become very clear in the preceding pages. Even if the relevance of gender in the respective counselling context varies, it is clear that there is no such thing as gender-neutral counselling. If we understand men's counselling – like counselling in general – to be a service, then the customer or client may expect to receive the same good counselling service as other people who seek counselling here. In this sense, an expectation of neutrality in the service »counselling« is completely justified. However, this does not mean that the counsellor should be blind to the individual characteristics of the client. Nor should they assume that they themselves, as counsellors, are neutral. On the contrary, special attention to the specifics is necessary in order to actually meet the individual (counselling) needs. This is a general nutshell.

Counselling is – as the practical examples in this guide impressively demonstrate – a special situation of interaction in which gender plays an indelible role. Gender ideals and clichés are always present, and »doing gender« starts with supposedly inconspicuous clothing, continues with tone of voice and melody of speech, and extends to gestures, facial expressions and posture. Even the objective questions that are dealt with in counselling cannot be completely separated from the fact that a man is looking for answers in his specifically masculine way.

Therefore, professional counselling must be sensitive to gender on the objective as well as on the relational level. For example, how does a hand extended in greeting affect a client? Does it create equality? Is it perceived as insolence? Is it perhaps even a gesture that can be perceived as disrespect? Does it make a difference whether a woman, a man or a non-binary person shakes hands? In the full sense of the term, successful counselling depends on the very first moments and the first instants of appropriate contact; it thus also depends on non-verbal communication. As soon as a client enters the counselling room, the gender-coded interaction begins – even in digital space. This holds both opportunities and potential for disruption.

Especially at the beginning of counselling, a client may display stereotypical, hyper-ritualised male behaviour. Such behaviour may be irritating, but it can also be understood as an attempt by the client to clarify his own identity in a stylised way, in a sense, as an offer to take a short-cut: »Okay, that's been cleared up; now we can get down to business, please.«

This guide is intended to draw attention to this level of everyday interaction in counselling and to the permanent (unconscious) »doing gender« or »doing masculinity«. At the Federal Forum for Men, we are convinced that sensitivity to gender and masculinity as a continuous thread in the counselling situation can increase the quality of counselling. What we do not expect from counselling is that gender and masculinity are constantly addressed directly. On the contrary.

A comparison with school can perhaps make this clear. The best mathematician in her final year at university is by no means the best teacher of mathematics in the classroom. According to sociologist Hartmut Rosa, cognitive learning and comprehension work best through resonance: »If a teacher succeeds in capturing the attention of their students in such a way that it 'sparks' in the classroom, [then] moments of mutual mental touch and being touched arise,« (Rosa/Endres 2016: p. 16). With regard to school content, he explains that it is not enough „to acquire things, to master them, to deal with them,« (ibid. p. 17). If things go right, a schoolchild can make a new »part of the world« their own in such a way that it changes them. Such a »part of the world« can be a poem, a mathematical formula or even an athletic success. Rosa emphasises that the quality of the relationship or contact between teacher and pupil is of great importance.

What does this mean for counselling men? Competence in masculinity can help to create counselling situations with male clients in which there is a »spark«. Conversely, this means that it is not wise for counsellors, no matter how competent they are, to speak disparagingly about football fans when the client is wearing a fan shirt. Similarly, it is also not wise to constantly use metaphors from the football sphere if the other person obviously has no use for them at all. This example clearly shows that clichés can help, but they can also cause a counselling process to fail from the start. This is exactly where a competent approach to masculinity comes in.

We want to make people aware of the fact that men have their own axes of resonance and that much can be achieved if counselling succeeds in making something resonate positively with a client. This can also be sadness or anger if they are an expression of the client being able to establish contact with his inner self. However, due to their male socialisation, many men find it difficult to let themselves be touched and to make something ring within themselves. The emotional impact of being moved and touched inside, also means a certain loss of control and is usually quickly framed as more feminine. This poses a great challenge to our quality standards for male-sensitive counselling. Gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented counselling should consciously make use of something that runs counter to typical male strategies for coping with problems, but which nevertheless promises great success in counselling – namely to bring men into contact with their own feelings, needs and resonance spaces.

Counsellors speak time and again – as in our practical examples – of men who report back to them that they were the first ones they could talk to about an issue. What this means in each case can be very different. We also know of male counsellors who find that the client tends to look for a friend in them because he feels lonely and very alone with his challenges. This is a typical male phenomenon and presents counsellors with the challenge of maintaining a balance between good contact (resonance) and professional distance. The protective space of counselling can be a gateway for men to question the

normalities and necessities (demands of masculinity) learned in the course of a »male« life, to leave them behind if necessary and to open up new spaces of possibility. In this way, counselling can also make a contribution to equality policy, without itself appearing as policy.

From the point of view of the Federal Forum for Men, men's counselling can be understood as part of an equality policy strategy that aims to overcome gender stereotypes. As such, we believe it should also be publicly supported and promoted. Men's counselling should be provided nationwide as a self-evident part of the provision of services and prevention. This is because men who seek counselling already undermine a central stereotypical expectation of men, namely that they overcome challenges through (self-)mastery or the exercise of control. It is important to support this without wanting to crown men who seek counselling with laurels. It should not be forgotten, however, that giving recognition is an important positive reinforcement for desirable behaviour. In the concept of the triangle of development (see Chapter 3.3), this lies on the axis between support and opening up. »It's good that you've come to us with this. Let's see together how you can move on.« As mundane as this may seem, such an invitation to look at the problems together and to identify possible solutions is already a big step for many men; this process must be reconciled with an internalised call for »autonomy« (»Be a man!«).

Men's counselling is not aimed at re-education, but at facilitating and encouraging men to integrate the use of help and counselling by third parties into their self-image as a self-evident option for coping with life. The limitation – to refer to the third axis of the concept of the triangle of development – is that counselling in itself cannot solve a man's problems; that is his own responsibility. Sometimes clients who seek counselling have this kind of expectation of repair or rescue. However, counselling that really resonates with a client also contains the imposition of actual change. This work of change must be accepted and done by the client himself, with all the support that counselling can provide. The practical examples in Chapter 4 make this very clear. Counselling for integration into the labour market for ex-prisoners also means that the man has to learn to live and accept a life with a low to average monthly income, in order not to become a delinquent again. Counselling for a homeless person, which leads to him moving into his own flat at the beginning of the next month, represents a considerable change for him, one with which clients are sometimes actually unable to cope. These rather extreme examples show that the men's life coping strategies, some of which have been practised for a long time, and their sometimes extremely rigid and narrow self-conceptions of masculinity can sometimes come under considerable pressure through counselling. Counselling must take this into account in order not to lose the man along the counselling path. Another aspect

to the responsibility of counselling as a professional practice is to ensure that male clients do not become defensive or even break off counselling.

This is precisely what an increased sensitivity to masculinity, which always resonates when counselling men, should contribute to by improving the footing for counselling professionals beyond the professional counselling competence. At the Federal Forum for Men, we are convinced that this perspective must be part of the standard repertoire of any professional counselling practice in the future and indeed will become so in the medium term. Currently, however, there are only very few providers who can offer further training in this sense and at the level of qualitatively appropriate standards of gender-reflective and masculinity-oriented counselling. There is an urgent need to professionalise the entire field, from the primary professional qualification of a counsellor to specifically oriented further training courses or in-house offers in the form of one-day workshops.

At the Federal Forum for Men, we hope that we have been able to provide two impulses with this guide. First, we hope that the counselling landscape itself discovers a need for more gender/masculinity competence and makes this more strongly known. Second, we wish that providers of counselling services, municipalities, states and the federal government recognise that this is an important field that is worth developing with their own resources – not least in order to contribute to more gender equality from the bottom up.

Appendix

A large, stylized teal graphic element, possibly a letter 'B' or a similar shape, is positioned on the right side of the page. It is set against a dark blue background.



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Bundesfach- und Koordinierungsstelle Männergewaltschutz (BFKM)

→ and assistance for professionals in the field of protection against violence against men

→ Overview and contact options: men's shelters for victims of domestic violence

www.maennergewaltschutz.de

Hilfetelefon Gewalt an Männern

Help hotline and online counselling for men who have experienced violence – in childhood, on the street, in institutions, in partnerships.

Telephone
0800 123 99 00

www.maennerhilfetelefon.de

Bundesfach- und Koordinierungsstelle

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