

Making health manly: Media, norms, and men's health

“Health matters are women's matters.” “Only women pamper their bodies.” There is substantial evidence—at least in the United States—that asking for help and caring for one's health are widely considered to be the province of women (Courtenay, *Engendering Health*, 2000). Collective beliefs and assumptions such as these are what social scientists refer to as *social norms* (Berkowitz, 2003) or *subjective norms* (Ajzen, 2001).

Given the existence of these norms, it is not surprising that in most western industrialized countries, women are the greatest consumers of health-related products and services. Women are often first to take responsibility, not only for the health and well-being of themselves and their offspring, but also for the health of men. This helps to explain why single men have the greatest health risks—and why the benefits of marriage are consistently found to be greater for men than for women (who can suffer substantial stress in caring for their spouses) (Courtenay, *Behavioral factors*, 2000).

Ultimately, men need to take greater responsibility for their own health, if they are to live as long and as healthily as women do. But here is the problem: Men receive strong social prohibitions against doing *anything* that women do (Courtenay, *Engendering Health*, 2000).

Men and boys who engage in behaviors representing feminine gender norms risk being perceived as “wimps” or “sissies” (Courtenay, *Constructions of Masculinity*, 2000). Consequently, men often prove manhood by *actively rejecting* doing anything that women do—and this includes caring for their health (Courtenay, *Constructions of Masculinity*, 2000). Not surprisingly, there is solid evidence that masculinity is associated with health behavior, and even predicts mortality (Courtenay, 2003).

Of course, many men *are* concerned about their health. But as long as men believe that their peers are unconcerned about *their* health, they will be less likely to attend to their own health needs. What this means is that for men to change, social norms will have to change.

Results of a recent survey of over 500 men on one U.S. college campus indicated that these men believed that most (55%) of their peers were either not at all concerned or only a little concerned about their health. Actually, only 35% of men were unconcerned about their health; most (65%) reported being either somewhat or very concerned (unpublished data). These data could be used to create a social norms marketing campaign designed to promote the true norm that men at this particular college *are* in fact concerned about their health.

A similarly effective, way to change social norms is with the use of accounts by prominent members of a particular group about how they became involved in their health. Research shows that people can be persuaded to behave in ways that they believe credible, influential colleagues or peers want them to behave (Petty, Wegener & Fabrigar, 1997). Perhaps then men will begin to see health and well-being as *human* concerns, and see that following good health habits can be manly as well as lifesaving.

Will Courtenay, PhD, LCSW