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UrbanTrends

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Effectively Engaging Men and Fathers to Support the Health and Wellness of Their Families

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A Letter From the President

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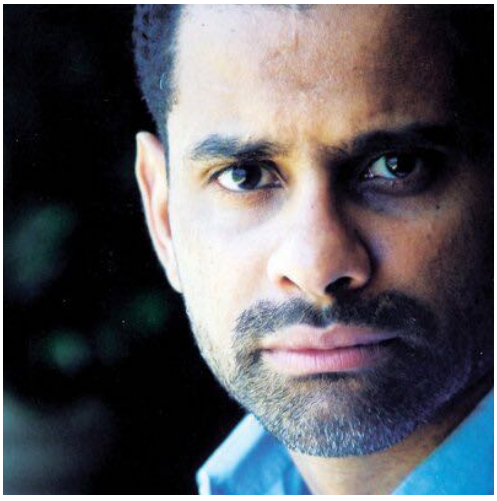
Events in recent years involving African-American NFL football players Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson were missed opportunities to provide teachable moments for America.

Ray Rice, after beating his fiancé in an elevator, lost his contract with the Baltimore Ravens, spurring new NFL policies regarding treatment of domestic abuse. Adrian Peterson faced probation and fines for beating his son but after a less than one-year suspension, now plays for the Washington Redskins. Each man was, and continues to be, widely criticized for their abusive behavior. However, a productive and public dialogue about the underlying issues and stigmas never occurred.

Using physical abuse to resolve conflicts within romantic or parental relationships instead of healthy forms of discipline is a learned behavior — and can be unlearned. Much of this behavior is learned from everyday culture and interactions. Men in domestic-abuse or corporal-discipline situations are repeating the unhealthy behaviors they've seen modeled on TV and film, referenced in popular music, and within their own families, often passed on from generation to generation. It is so pervasive that it is easily internalized.



Unhealthy behavior in relationships is also the result of generational trauma, and many believe, a cultural artifact among African-Americans. Enslaved Africans brought to this country as free labor quickly learned that those with power could use violence to control not only actions but the hope for freedom. Throughout history, harsh discipline of children has been seen by some parents as a way of protecting them from the even harsher consequences of "acting out" in public, including death. The seeds sown in this ugly period of American history are paying some disturbing dividends.

In a nation where interactions within workplaces and other venues still convey dis-empowerment and both overt and covert racism, sometimes men choose to compensate for their sense of powerlessness in those spaces by exerting power and control in their own homes. Black men who use violence to control may justify their actions by defaulting to, "That's how I was raised."

In order to create healthier relationships within families, we have to think about what kinds of messages boys and men of color receive in their homes, communities, and in society, and what it means to truly "be a man." We need to re-frame the conversation and develop new messages that will lead to healthier behaviors. An important first step is to explore in detail how we can create a dialogue that enables prevention and recovery messages to be effective in changing abusive behaviors among men of color. To do so, the messages must be culturally relevant and engage these males (particularly, low-income Black men) in a way that does not make them feel attacked, ashamed, stigmatized, or stereotyped.

Over the past two decades, I've had the opportunity to conduct audience research directly with boys and men of color (BMOCs), specifically those from low-income communities with the highest health, social and economic disparities. I've heard their rationals for their behaviors and I've listened to their arguments, with an ear toward developing shareable counterarguments to their current perceptions and the obstacles/barriers to healthy behavior change. I have witnessed young men internalize and act on messages when they are culturally relevant, meaning reflective of oral communications, properly contextualized, and identify/speak to/reflect the costs and benefits of behavior change. Once men are engaged without being talked down to, stigmatized, or judged they, in turn, will generate the kind of word-of-mouth messages that create a change in norms while reducing stigma within the community at large.

Holding an open, honest and culturally relevant dialogue about these issues can encourage males who have exhibited such behaviors to seek help. Otherwise, we run the risk of driving domestic violence further underground, as both victims and perpetrators are silenced. Widely disseminating recovery messages at the community level can also serve as prevention for young men who are just starting their own families or engaging in intimate relationships. We can model what healthy parenting behaviors and partner relationships look like.

We must go beyond the hype and understand what men like Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson need in their lives in order to react differently in moments of conflict. Our goal is to be part of the solution by identifying promising approaches and culturally relevant behavioral health intervention strategies that could change male behavioral norms in communities of color.

Being A Responsible Father And Partner

Shifting Fatherhood Expectations Beyond Just Being a Provider

Recently, MEE Productions, in conjunction with the Louisiana Bureau of Family Health (BFH), conducted focus groups with African American fathers in New Orleans, Shreveport, and Baton Rouge. The focus groups were aimed at hearing their thoughts on fatherhood and the expectations that come along with it.

Many subjects spoke about the difficulty of meeting social expectations, such as the ability to provide for their families, protect their children and keep them safe in challenging environments, and teach them what they need to know to survive in America as people of color. While most subjects reported these expectations as being extremely important to them, they also acknowledged that the daily stressors that come with being a Black man in America undercut their ability to be present for their families.

Despite those stressors, many men said they are more involved in maintaining the home (housework) and day-to-day childcare than men of previous generations and also reported involvement in prenatal care visits during pregnancy and presence during the baby's birth.

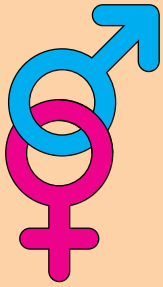
However, men reported less responsibility when it comes to making family planning decisions. Men may decide when they will or will not use a condom, but the decision to use additional or more effective methods of contraception is often made without their input. Decisions related to the health and wellbeing of the child, such as doctor's visits, immunizations, and whether or not to breastfeed, are generally left to the mother. Some men believe that reproductive health is "a woman's business," and that many social service policies are skewed in favor of women and children, rather than designed to keep families healthy and intact.

And while most fathers are committed to the health and wellbeing of their children, they report the lack of a trusting relationship with BFH-related agencies, claiming to see little evidence that systems care enough about them to conduct specific and culturally relevant outreach.

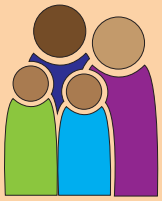
These focus groups were limited to men in a few cities in Louisiana, but the findings are applicable to communication tactics for reaching Black men generally.

The Bureau of Family Health and agencies like it can reach men by creating messaging that:

Raises awareness among Black fathers about the benefits of involvement in their childrens' lives regardless of the relationship between the two parents



Increases the self-efficacy of Black males to initiate conversations with their partners about their sexual and reproductive health, so that they can be an active part of the decision-making process



Offers ongoing support to males to actively participate in all family health matters

Being A Responsible Father And Partner
(Continued)

These messages should be disseminated so that they can be seen and heard in the places where Black males live, learn, work, shop and/or socialize. Furthermore, BFH and similar agencies should focus their attention on partnering with organizations that have the strongest grassroots relationships with the community, including key nonprofits, churches, service providers, organizations, Black fraternities, barber shops, sports programs (AAU or travel baseball/ soccer teams).

Other ways to raise the grassroots profile of agencies similar to BFH include:

"Get to Know Us" events and open houses.
These male-friendly events, organized like a job fair or health fair in which participants rotate from table to table, are where fathers would have the chance to meet with representatives of local health clinics and social-services agencies in a non-punitive, welcoming environment. Understanding what is happening in the clinics may help men be better prepared to provide their own voice or perspective in the choices their families make about their health.

A Man-to-Man Community Engagement Corps.
The most outspoken fathers who have a neighborhood following can become message senders to other males from similar backgrounds and situations and help the information-dissemination effort. If they are invited to the table in an honest, respectful and meaningful way, they will, in turn, share what they have learned with their peers, exponentially increasing the reach of any campaign messages. The best way to engage hard-to-reach men is by using a cadre of other males from their community who have "been-there done that."

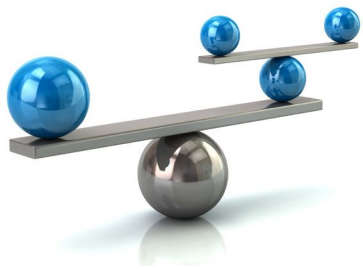
Father-friendly parenting and relationship classes and support groups.
These classes could include effective communication strategies, workshops, support groups for single and married fathers, and community forums where Black males can feel that they are not alone in the struggle to create and sustain healthy families. They can also learn from peers who've found ways to improve communication and relationships with their children, significant others, and co-parents.

Weakness or Strength?
Safe Spaces for Men to Talk About Learned Masculinity
A Paradigm Shift for Healthy Relationships

Domestic violence, poor communication skills, lack of participation in family planning decisions, and insensitivity to emotional needs can affect the quality of intimate relationships, cohesiveness of families, and the well-being of entire communities.

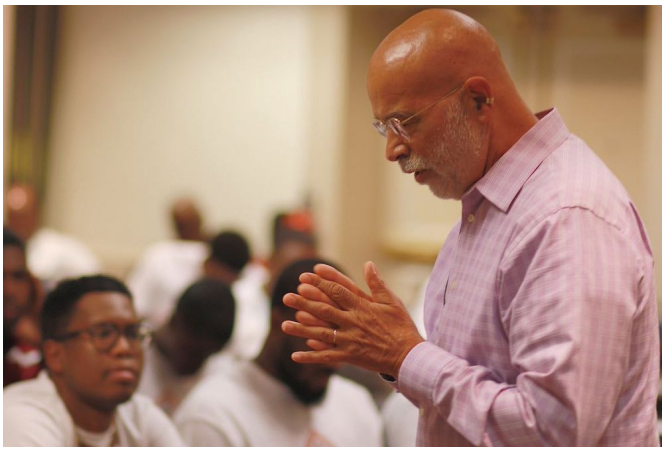
There is no quick fix for these behaviors. But Sulaiman Nuriddin, M.Ed., family therapist, couples counselor, educator, and specialist in violence against women believes that change lies in a paradigm gradual shift in the ways men are expected to behave.

Having spent 30 years working with Men Stopping Violence, an Atlanta-based organization that works to end male violence against women and girls, Nurridin has interacted with thousands of men of color. He talks with them about what they can do to be present in relationships, address struggles related to power and control issues, end domestic violence, and become more balanced and well-adjusted.



The paradigm shift that Nuriddin speaks of begins on a micro level, he says, with men themselves accepting the simple fact that they can change.

Assumptions about the stagnancy and invariability of a man's nature are widespread and result in the misconception that change is not possible. However, Nurridin believes that roles and behaviors related to masculinity are learned and can be altered. "I believe violence, aggressive behavior is a learned behavior, not a mental health issue," he says.



Once men realize and accept that their behavior is within their control, change can begin. Self-awareness and consciousness of one's presence within relationships is the root of all other changes.

Behavior self-reflection seems simple; a mere calling and focusing of attention. Yet conventional notions of masculinity discourage men from doing so. "We live in a society that says that when men begin to talk about those things, it's a sign of weakness. I believe the opposite. I believe that that's where our strength is. [When we] sit down and talk about that without fear of being labelled or ridiculed or put down or excluded in some type of way, it makes a difference." After men have come to terms with their own feelings, Nurridin recommends safe spaces where men can convene to continue to make sense of their own feelings and support the feelings of others. "I believe that if you've not done the work on yourself, if you've not checked and challenged yourself, it's going to be virtually impossible to be in the presence of other men and challenge and confront them [about their behaviors]," Nuriddin says. Acknowledging and accepting individual actions results in an ability to take responsibility and more importantly, it allows men to take steps to behave differently in the future. There's power, Nuriddin says, in no longer denying or hiding from actions, and instead fully realizing how one's actions hurt other people. Nuriddin says: "Sometimes there's a need for us as men to take responsibility for something we've done in a relationship. It's not about walking away from that, saying 'Well, that happened a long time ago.' It's about: How do I take responsibility? How do I become accountable for what I've done? How do I name what I did, and the pain, fear, anxiety and confusion and all the stuff I caused from what I did? How do I stand up for that and recognize that what I did was wrong?" Nuriddin says men should express sadness for past negative behaviors and resolve not to repeat them. It's an exercise in empathy, in honoring other people's feelings in the same way that we honor our own.

> *"We live in a society that says when men begin to talk about those things, it's a sign of weakness. I believe the opposite."*

When men can reflect on their behaviors more deeply, they can

Safe Spaces for Men to Talk About Learned Masculinity
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offer more of themselves in their relationships—including parental relationships—and engage in more productive communication. Sulaiman encourages us to ask, "How do we create healthy relationships? What can we do in the beginning to teach and educate about what it is to be in a relationship? Why did I choose you as a partner? Why did you choose me as a partner? What do we do when romantic love ends and all of a sudden we're faced with the differences and how do we deal with those differences?" If we, first, recognize our own needs and, second, learn how to communicate these needs to the people in our lives, we'd all be healthier, he says.

In the paradigm shift Nuriddin advocates, an individual's health is both the cause and effect of their own responsible actions. He's asking, ultimately, "What can we do as men to begin to look at how we show up in relationships? How do we deal with issues around aggression? And how do we process that in a way that doesn't create fear and harm and unsafety for others?" He advocates for healthier men, which means healthier relationships and a healthier world.

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