

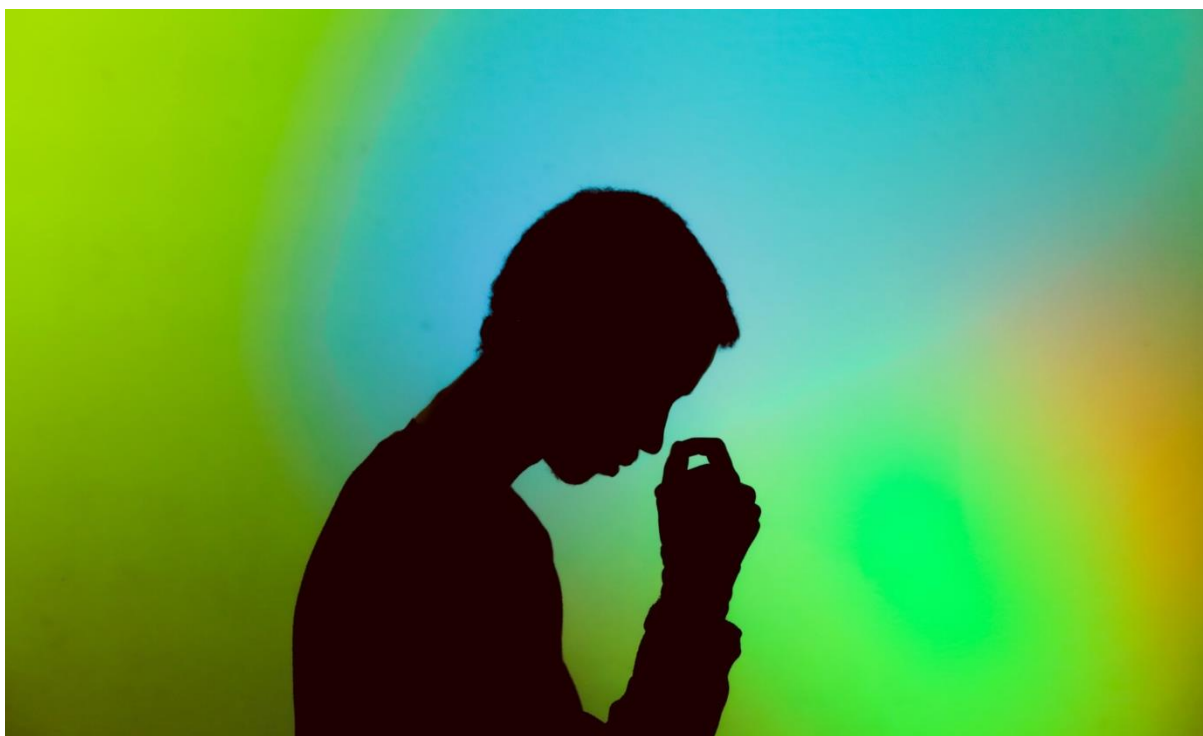


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Another Kind of Toxic Masculinity

It's not all arrogance, rage and dominance. Yet it's equally dark and it comes from someplace else. I would know — it's me.



Posted by [John Gorman](#), Nov 11, 2019
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I'm no one's idea of a man. Hell, I'm not even *my* idea of a man. For the vast majority of my 37 years spent orbiting the sun, I've struggled to see myself as a fully-grown male adult, as someone in control of my destiny, as a born leader, someone ready to take on the world, a wholly formed and complex man, protector and provider (outdated as those traditional roles may be, they're retro-masculine shorthand for "a dude who has his proverbial shit together"). Here ... let me paint you a picture.

Other than my hard-earned and harder-to-lose beer gut, I have precisely zero characteristic masculine features. No V-shaped torso. No bulging biceps. No square jaw. I sport corgi legs and T-Rex arms. I'm 5'7. I bench-press the bar on a good day. My voice mostly sounds like a gentle NPR whisper, or — on the rare occasion I raise it — an affect-less cyborg attempting stand-up. I'm bald-ish. Without my beard, I look like a life-like rendering of the Pillsbury dough boy with soft brown eyes. I smile 7000% more than the average American dude, and research repeatedly suggests that short, soft, scrawny, smooth, smiling men are deemed by their peers and potential mates to be less desirable as leaders, workers and life partners.

The dissimilarities don't stop there. I don't *do* cars. I'm petrified of guns. I find the vast majority of *Marvel* films dull and characterless. I don't game. I don't yell and bang on things at football games and tailgates. I've never thrown a punch. I don't get my rocks off verbally accosting people with whom I disagree. I don't engage in "locker room talk." I find pick-up culture repulsive. I don't view women as subservient baby-factories or as a warm, safe hole to insert my dick. I don't talk about crushing my workouts. I mostly eat plants. I don't kill spiders (I gently scoop them on a sheet of paper and lovingly release them onto my balcony) and I always order my lobsters pre-killed so they're already meat instead of a living, breathing thing when it's time for me to eat them. I'm not cocky, seething with rage or on a mission to eviscerate my competition. I really enjoyed that Gillette commercial (you know which one), although as a 15-year veteran of the ad industry, I despise "woke capitalism" in general, as I believe it's a pandering cash grab masquerading as moral clarity. I'm a lamb in sheep's clothing.

All that said, that endless scroll of characteristics correlates or perhaps even caused certain aspects of me to be 180 degrees different from the kind of toxic traits associated with the modern American man, and the patriarchal man-box in general. I've always despised or dismissed the hyper-competitive and combative men with whom I share a common gender. I'm not violent. I don't take pleasure in asserting my dominance. I never bullied. I've never laid my hands on a woman. I take "no" for an answer (and I hear it a lot). I'm as aggressive as a kitten on klonopin. I'm patient, kind, vulnerable, graceful and non-judgmental. I talk (loudly and proudly) about my emotions and mental health. I instinctively center the sexual experience around my partner's pleasure and orgasm instead of my own. I find the genre of porn where bland-ass dude-bros drill a broad

into a clearly-exaggerated paralysis of sweaty, screaming bliss laughable at best, non-arousing most often, and unethical or immoral at worst. I don't fuck with hustle-culture. I don't angle to climb the corporate ladder, and I roundly reject most of the limited paradigms through which men in this country see themselves. I find breathtakingly little in common with fuck-bois, frat-bros, gym-rats, jar-heads, NASCAR dads, Chads, Brads and Rustys. I find *The Alchemist*, *Rick and Morty*, *Fight Club* and *The Gospel of Gordon Gekko* **all** to be problematic. I may be an asshole (for reasons we'll get to), but I always took comfort in being able to confidently say, "well ... at least I'm not one of **those** assholes."

This has led me to occupy a peculiar and seemingly singular space in society: I'm the rare man who women consistently label "one of the good ones," and who women implicitly trust and feel safe around in ways they wouldn't if I were built otherwise, yet also—and this is twice as surprising to me as it is to you — I'm still often deemed desirable and viewed as a sexual creature. Women slide into *my* DMs, buy *me* drinks, ask *me* out on dates, and randomly masturbate on the phone while I tell *them* stories — and I'm not-at-all wealthy, fit, powerful, a celebrity or conventionally attractive. If that all sounds like candy and roses to you, then you must be new to my writing here, and you glazed over the title of this piece. I'm still toxic. I know this, because I've had my wrists slapped for being so. Now we'll talk about how.

Most of the traits that make Toxic Masculinity, well

...toxic ... ladder back to two central ideas: extreme self-reliance and emotional repression. The competitive, sexually and physically aggressive, risk-courting behaviours of men exhibiting these traits often stem from myths that men need to be extremely self-reliant and emotionally stoic or fiery in order to truly be men. Asking for help and feeling anything other than strong, steely confidence or chaotic rage are strictly verboten. Life is zero-sum with only winners and losers, predators and prey, takers and the taken advantage of. Man must emerge victorious, dominant, stable, rich and successful. Leaders. Alphas. Casanovas. Violence, misogyny, greed, mental illness and societal ruin are part and parcel — collateral damage in men's relentless pursuit of being the strongest, fittest, richest, best and most unbothered.

Those who initially try their hand at playing this game and fail or lose for various reasons angrily take their ball(s) and go home, and often fall into emotional states like depression, anxiety, resentment and bitterness; they

resort to counterproductive behavioural patterns like *quid pro quo* forms of kindness, manipulation, deception, left-wing slack-tivism, and brash intellectual elitism. These are your “beta-males,” “nice guys,” “soft-bois,” performative “woke-bros,” and “snowflakes.” They’re easily identifiable in their caustic hatred of capitalism, fear of the “friend zone,” disinterest in sports and fitness, subtle microaggressions of the marginalized, affinity for west coast IPAs, and closeted envy of every dude they claim to be better than. They’re playing in a different league, but the sport is the same, and the rules evolve as cultural norms shift. If you read this paragraph and started seething or felt an uncomfortable defensiveness burble up in your belly, chances are you fall into this category. You still crave dominance, you’re still hyper-competitive, you’re still repressing your emotions and too ashamed to ask for help and be seen as weak. Still, this is not the *other* Toxic Masculinity I’m referring to, or the one that I exhibit. This is an alternate route to the same destination.

Let’s explore the central themes I first noded to

earlier: extreme self-reliance and emotional repression. These are, without question, the two central tenants of my own pathological thoughts and behaviours. I loathe asking for help and working as a team, and will often suffer alone in silence, or sabotage my own success, instead of clearly vocalize or work toward my goals and ambitions. I’m *far* too ashamed to productively discuss or deal with pain or negative feelings—notably, including anger, which is *always* inward directed. This is why I write my feelings. It’s become a gateway to discussing and dealing with them, but I initially started because this was easier on my ego.

Now, normally when we talk about these in regards to Toxic Masculinity, we associate their causes with father figures, peer groups, representation in media and entertainment, or institutions that reinforce patriarchy or masculine culture. They tell you: “Men don’t ask for help.” “Men must always project confidence and strength.” “Men don’t cry.” “Men don’t go to therapy.” “Man up and do it.” Etc. And we can easily rattle off the desired ends of this programming: to be seen as ruggedly independent, the alpha wolf in the pack, the most dominant force in the community. A man’s man that other men want to be, and other women want to be with. Here’s the key divergence between the Toxic Masculinity you’re familiar with and the other flavour I’m about to disclose: My behaviours are exactly the same, but it’s caused by something wildly different and my goals are much different.

I grew up coddled, sheltered and gaslit, in a household that featured a well-intentioned but emotionally manipulative mother who battled her own intergenerational trauma, stemming from her own upbringing. She was a stay-at-home mom until into her 40s, who drew her self-worth and purpose from ensuring her children would never grow up and always love her, and spent long evenings between 1993–1998 screaming at my deflective, equally overprotective and soft-spoken father for perceived slights and flaws until he'd finally had enough, severed their marriage and left the home. At times, she did the same with her children — screaming, smothering and smacking us in between grandiose gestures of kindness that stemmed from a pathological fear of us viewing her the way she viewed her own mom.

My sister suffered a traumatic brain injury at age 3 that went undetected and undiagnosed until three decades later, and unwittingly caused difficulties in emotional regulation and executive function. Like her mother, she saw, and sees, the world in extreme black-and-white binaries, cries at the drop of a hat, and fears abandonment.

My brother exists on the Autistic Spectrum — again, undetected and undiagnosed until well into his teens. He, too, was prone to emotional outbursts, and feared abandonment. My brother and sister consistently clashed with our mom and each other.

In that house, I **had** to project calm, confidence and steely resolve. I heard enough yelling and witnessed enough pain and conflict. I wanted no part of it. I was the glue, the peacemaker, the perpetually happy-go-lucky prodigal son projecting an aura of “everything’s okay” and “how can I complain?” I escaped to my bedroom as often as possible, drowning myself in spiral notebooks, sports almanacs, music and educational texts.

I, also, wasn’t allowed to express sadness, frustration or disappointment without others chiming in with their own demonstrably greater sadness, frustration or disappointment. My problems weren’t real problems, and, if they were, my parents would solve them or convince me that whatever was causing me distress was probably not something worth pursuing or worrying about. I was shielded — overwhelmingly so — from disappointment, pain, rejection, risk, or the pain and concerns of adulthood. “You don’t want to grow up,” they’d tell me. “It’s not as fun as it is being a kid.” And, if something didn’t break my way after an attempt, I was convinced I probably didn’t really want it anyway.

I was late to every conceivable developmental milestone: walking, potty training, riding a bicycle, getting a driver's license, traveling or being alone in general without supervision. I wasn't allowed to date. I initially hid my girlfriends and interest in women in general. I never had an allowance. I escaped home as often as I could to discover what I might become if I were allowed to be autonomous, although I never fully felt autonomous, and if I was ever late, or not where I initially said I would be, I'd be scolded and grounded.

I also grew up sick. I had chronic sinusitis, illness and infections, and developed severe chronic asthma at age 3, stemming from a primary immunodeficiency and deviated septum that, again, both went undiagnosed until I was 35. I spent my life forcibly avoiding allergens, exercise, cold air, irritants and any activity that could exacerbate an attack. I'd be accosted for failing to properly protect myself or take my medicine.

As I aged into my teens and twenties, I became enamoured with possibilities and exploration. I was amazed by peers who'd already begun drinking, drugging and fucking, traveling and going to concerts alone, and enthusiastically joined in those pursuits.

I was also stunned to learn that there was an entire swath of kids who argued with their parents — and successfully so. I rebelled, and my detours from the strict straight-and-narrow were crushed by the powers that be, rather than examined as learning opportunities. The farther I could go, the farther I could push the envelope, the more free I would feel.

I tried, twice, to attend college far away from home — first in the South and then in the West. I secretly applied to 14 schools — all very good and all names you know — during Freshman and Sophomore years and, despite getting into all of them, I was sternly told I couldn't go because I wasn't ready or responsible enough to live on my own, and couldn't afford it anyway.

Eventually, I stopped asking for assistance. I stopped sharing my problems. I stopped expressing my negative feelings. I started taking any risk I could. I distanced myself from anyone who I felt too

close to. I walled my authentic self off from the world, and bottled my negative energy, afraid I would anger or disappoint someone. I only shared my achievements, successes and happiness.

“Men don’t ask for help.” “Men must always project confidence and strength.” “Men don’t cry.” “Men don’t go to therapy.” “Man up and do it.” Extreme self-reliance. Emotional repression. I didn’t do these things to be seen as dominant, victorious, or even manly — I did them to feel free. Independent. Adult. Capable. **Normal**. Despite being rooted in wildly different negative programming and in service of wildly more modest and equitable end-goals, the hallmark behaviours of Toxic Masculinity began to take shape:

I raged. Not because the culture told me it was acceptable, but because I had unprocessed trauma and everything was a trigger.

I wouldn’t do anything I couldn’t control. Not because I needed to be the alpha dog, but because I was barred from dictating my own destiny.

I became overly flirty and promiscuous. Not because I saw women as a conquest, but because I really just wanted to love and connect, and as an open-air rejection of the childlike innocence and wholesomeness I was always expected to embody.

I worked myself half to death. Not because I wanted to climb to the top of the totem pole, but because I wanted to feel like I could actually go out and achieve what I set my mind to, instead of giving up.

I started to run myself into the ground. Not because I wanted to brag about my athletic dominance, but because I was so sick of being labelled “sick.”

I developed a habit of talking over people. Not because I wanted to be the alpha in the room, but because I was sick of being shouted down or having my ideas and concerns dismissed.

I stopped accepting help. Not because I wanted to be a man, but because in my head I felt like I “should already know how to do this by now” and I wanted to hide that I couldn’t.

I became resentful of others’ success and lifelong partnerships. Not because I felt I was better than them, but because I wished I hadn’t gotten such a late start in learning how to succeed or effectively love.

I didn’t disclose my pain. Not to feel macho, but because expressing it in the past was only met with “so what?,” a re-centering of the discussion on

the listener, or a solution I didn't ask for. (*In my bleakest of financial straights, my mom once famously gave me \$3000 after I told her I didn't want any help, and then scolded me with "you should be thanking me right now!" while also informing me that I would be paying all of it back to her in the forthcoming year **with interest**, and then went six months without speaking to me after I couldn't afford to repay her. I eventually did — three years later, after I'd paid off \$53,000 in interest-bearing debt first like a rational fucking person would.*)

I engaged in "nice guy" behaviour. Not because I wanted sex in return, but because I wanted a healthy and caring connection with a member of the opposite gender, and it was candidly nice to hear someone say "thank you" and mean it.

No, I never wanted to be the best, or the strongest, or the most dominant, or the wealthiest, or the most successful, or the most decorated. I wanted to be ... Healthy. Adult. Enough. **Normal**. I wanted to create a genuinely loving, inclusive, calm space that welcomed risk, rejection, connection, experimentation and emotional expression. But how do you create something you can't identify? How do you convince people turned off by your words and actions that your pathological thoughts and behaviour stem from a desire not to see yourself as dominant, but merely to see yourself as an **equal**?

If I'm being transparent — and, why stop now — I hadn't come up with a treatment plan for this until about two years ago. I had just turned 35, spent a couple months sober, and the clear head mixed with relentless commitment to documenting my every thought bubble gave me the space and the focus to understand how brutal my behaviour really was, and still can be.

I'm honestly not sure how well this is working, or if I'm just getting older and therefore just naturally progressing. The treatment is, truly, just a basic regiment of self-care. I feel more like an adult when I dress well, take care of my body, eat healthy, go to the doctor, invoice clients, clean the house, run errands, buy matching pieces of furniture and wall decor, ask for the things I want and the grace to fail, go to therapy, and do the things I say I'm going to do.

I don't do that shit all the time, but I do it enough that it makes a difference, and it's a helluva lot harder to feel like an overgrown child when you're at your laptop in your freshly mopped kitchen, watching

your credit score tick upward and your waistline shrink inside a crisp, dry-cleaned Oxford. I'd love to tell you it's deeper or catchier than that, but it isn't. The easiest way to feel like a functioning, responsible adult is to perform responsible adult functions, over and over again, until they become a little bit easier. That and finally learn, at age 36, that, yes, you really do have ADHD and you're not just a lazy, careless and stupid piece of shit. Then, take the Adderall you're given.

I still struggle with developmental milestones. I've never married, or bought a house with a yard, or fathered a child. It's hard for me not to see these things as extensions of my inability to see myself as a normal, functioning adult. Objectively, I don't even want those things. I'm trying to break my sense of self-worth and sense of adult-ness from checking the boxes we typically list under "things that make you a grown-up."

At first I was too young, then I was too poor, then when I was old enough and well-off enough, I was kind of a douche-bag. Now I'm past the age where that shit matters to me for any reason other than my own fragile ego.

But that ego, though, that tender thing that feels triggered by anything that makes me feel defective, or inhibits my autonomy, adulthood and sense of self-worth, is a tricky motherfucker to kill completely. I still have moments where I feel like I **should** be more put together than I am.

I still struggle to accept and ask for help sometimes. I still would rather write my feelings than discuss them with friends and family. (I do see a therapist regularly, though.) I still take unnecessary risks and self-sabotage when I fly too close to the sun of success. I still tend to exhibit avoidant attachment behaviours when I feel I'm too close to people. I still occasionally whiff on standing up for myself out of fear. I still trumpet my achievements a bit more often than I should, while simultaneously downplaying them. (I believe this is called "humble-bragging.") I still beat myself up when I make mistakes I feel that I shouldn't. I still work too hard and say yes to too much. I can still feel that tinge of resentment when I see others' successes or their happy family pictures on Instagram. It's not perfect yet, and it never really will be — and, holy shit, have I pissed a lot of people off and done a metric hellaton of dumb and reprehensible shit along the way — but I'd like to think I'm a little farther

along on the continuum of healing, growth and processing than I was when I finally started down the path of revolutionary self-improvement.

I recently just returned from visiting my mom, and I told her about how I planned to move to Portugal in the next six months, to cut down on living costs, slow down the pace of my life, become fluent in another language, publish my books, grow my business and a long beard, and spend afternoons walking along the beach, and escape the looming and terrifying end of the American Republic. I quit my six-figure corporate job two months ago; I had done all I could do there and have no interest in climbing the corporate ladder. I made enough money. I have no debt and no attachments, so the time is perfect to do so, and I'm excited to start a new adventure.

Naturally, she tried to talk me out of it, telling me she would worry about me, asking me if I was scared, or if I could really still do what I do now over there, or what I would do with the cat, or what would happen if I got sick, or if I would get depressed and want to kill myself again like I did when I spent a month overseas last year, or if I was **really** 100% sure I wanted to do it, or what would happen if I run out of money, or if I would miss everyone I was leaving behind.

I suspect she was asking because she was scared she wouldn't see me — further proof that her kid was all grown up, an adult who no longer needed her and would see her even less. I took that as further proof that I was on the right path. When in doubt, I err on the side of autonomy. I err on the side of fear, because I know those fears — of failure, of fraudulence, of making big adult decisions and working to pay them off — are not my own.

I'd like healthy love that lasts longer than an election cycle, and a modest house by the sea in a Mediterranean climate. I'd like to travel, tell stories, and create things that assuage suffering for others. Good food. Good sex. Just enough wine and bright sunshine. Everything else is just icing, ornamental, or is shit I've already done.

For the vast majority of my 37 years spent orbiting the sun, I've struggled to see myself as a fully-grown male adult, as someone in control of my destiny, as a born leader, someone ready to take on the world, a wholly formed and complex man, protector and provider.

I may never be any of those things — particularly those last two, which feel completely arbitrary and incongruous with how I'd like a partnership to be — but I think I'm close. Close enough to think a new life in a land across an ocean is well within my reach, and close enough to roundly reject most of the limited paradigms through which men in this country see themselves. I may be an asshole (for reasons you just read), but at least I'm not one of **those** assholes. And that's adult enough for me.