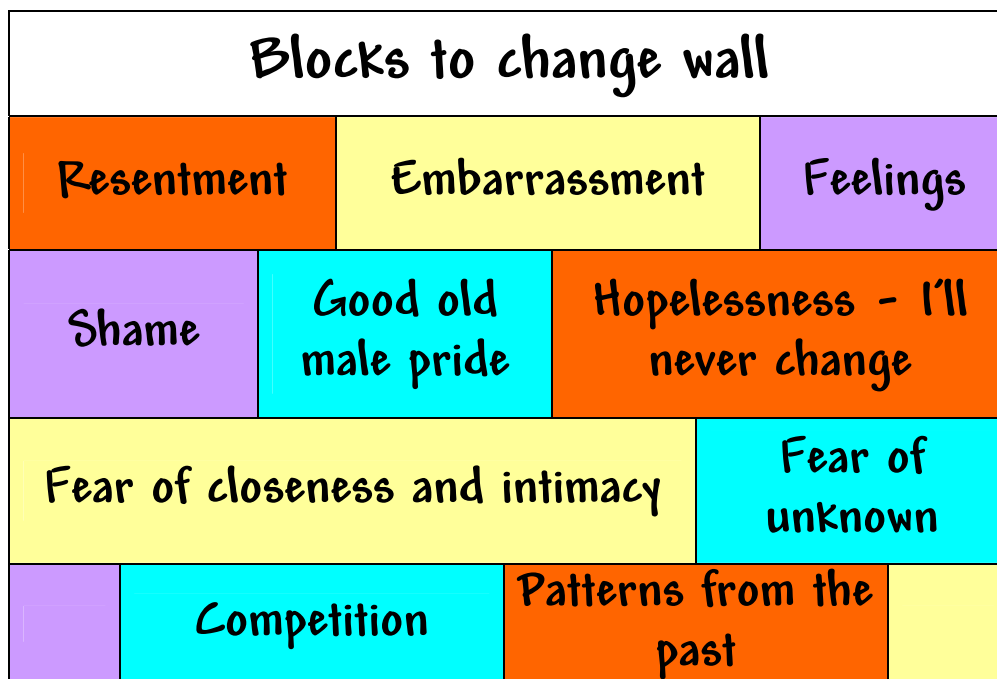


The Blocks to Change



When you consider changing old and redundant patterns of behaviour you will come up against blocks — all the reasons you can come up with that make it hard or even impossible to make real changes. The image of a block wall comes to mind. I am often impressed, firstly, by how easy it is for men to identify the beliefs and ideas that get in the way of acknowledging a problem exists and, secondly, by how these ideas and beliefs interfere with the process of change. It is as if men know these blocks to be true but are reluctant to own them



Let's explore more of these blocks in more depth.

Good Old Male Pride

It is not easy for men to admit that they make mistakes, haven't measured up or that they are not coping well with problems in their lives. In fact, admitting to a problem requires a great deal of strength because it is contrary to the very essence of male conditioning and the Old Rule Book. What gets paraded as pride is in essence false pride that gets in the way of men seeking the necessary help for often serious problems. Many men end up doing too little too late. Men who stand up and admit to themselves what is going on, who make the necessary changes and stick with them, can truly reclaim their pride. They can stand tall as men.

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Fear of Closeness and Intimacy

To be intimate is to be vulnerable. Often when men become close to someone they become afraid of what might possibly happen, particularly if they have been hurt in the past. Men are taught not to be vulnerable so this is not a comfortable feeling to have. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable does permit you to be open to new information about yourself and others. We also have a fear of intimacy with other men, because men often see intimacy closely linked to sexuality.

This fear of being close to men (homophobia) remains one of the stumbling blocks to men's change. Discovering that developing intimate fellowship with other men does not require that you give up your maleness or become homosexual is unblocking and liberating for many men. Homophobia, like other forms of prejudice, feeds on myths and untruths. When heterosexual men discover that gay men are very similar to themselves and that most information received about homosexuals is wrong, it is the fear of similarity, not difference, that is so frightening. Homophobia prevents emotional closeness between heterosexual men, and becomes an obstacle to friendships, self-disclosure and touching. The only time touching or intimate disclosure seems to be acceptable is either on the sports field or after having too much to drink. It is sad that these situations appear to be the only legitimate times that men can have this level of intimacy with each other.

Patterns from the Past

Another block to change concerns our patterns from the past. Patterns of thinking and acting are also known as scripts. They are really messages that each person carries about how the world is and how they should be in it. You would have learnt these values from your family of origin or the family system that you grew up in.

These messages or scripts can have the effect of limiting the choices that you feel you have, with the result that you may turn to old and familiar patterns when difficulties arise. These messages are guides to what you may or may not like to happen. When you adhere to them strictly, you will find yourself stuck with no way out.

Jack had received a script that said men had to work hard to achieve anything in life. His parents grew up through the depression of the 1930s and instilled these values. Unfortunately, Jack had no way of gauging when to stop and was working 50 to 70 hours a week. In fact too much of Jack's meaning in life related to his work and not the balance of other things in his life. Members of Jack's family got the rough end of the deal. When he came home he was tired and grumpy, not having much energy to participate in family life.

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He had become a stranger to his family and a favourite joke was 'Who are you?'

Jack felt guilty at not being around his family more, but he also felt guilty if he slackened off his work pace. He found himself caught in a bind over what was most important.

When Jack explored this script, he decided on the following course of action: he limited his work to 45 hours per week, looked closely at how he organised his time and re-engaged with his family. He found that by doing this he was just as productive (much of his extra ten to twenty hours were unproductive because of his tiredness), he had energy for his partner and children, and he was more content with his life. He recognised that he used work as a way of avoiding some of his own anxieties about being a good father. Jack was able to break the family tradition of being an absentee father, like his own father.

Everyone carries around with them a whole bag of these messages. You will be able to identify your scripts by the language you use to describe them. They often start with 'I should' or 'I must' or 'I shouldn't' or 'I must not'.

Exercise

-  Fill in a chart like the following by making a list of the 'should' and 'must' messages you carry around, and the impact of these messages from your childhood on how you should act towards others. I have made a start. You carry on.

The Script	Impact on how I act towards others
Others should be on time.	I get angry when others are late.
Men deserve respect.	Demanding and abusive when not respected.
I shouldn't get angry.	Others know I am angry and get anxious.
I should please everyone.	I am impatient with people's demands.
I am entitled to peace and quiet when I come home.	Others will be on edge.
I must provide well for my family.	I worry a lot about losing my job.
Men can't change.	I can't change my behaviour.



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Men have often told me that they vowed and declared they would not be like their fathers. Many finally stood up to their fathers at some time during adolescence, taking back their power. But they took it using violent means, which acted to reinforce that, if nothing else, violence works. They become confused when ten or so years later they act in exactly the same manner as their fathers.

In this way they perpetuate family patterns of violence, acting out earlier scripting. In turn, they pass these patterns on to their own children. Making a break with past patterns, which may have been in families for generations, is no easy task. It requires a great deal of perseverance and support. We men do not need to be slaves to our past.

I'll Never Change

Many men who have low self-esteem, or who have been told over many years that they are hopeless or useless, can have a feeling of defeat. When a person tries many times to change a behaviour without much success, or has come to believe that they can never change, the change will be blocked.

Hopelessness or defeat becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – the more you may think you cannot do something, the more likely it is that you don't do it. The issue is not that people cannot change but that they haven't the right tools or ideas to see the situation differently. Many men I have met find themselves stuck with beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that they can't see a way out of. Remember, you have probably done more of the same behaviour to solve a problem, but that only made the situation worse. When men are given a new view of the situation, they see that change is possible.

Shame

Shame is not a good motivator for change. When men feel shame they are saying to themselves and others that they are no good, and that it is hopeless to make changes. Changing because you are feeling ashamed often means a reaction to relieve discomfort. Often this can mean that action is not thought through. The best strategies can therefore be overlooked.

Guilt is a much healthier emotion to have. When you feel guilty, you know you have done something wrong and need to own up to it. You can be immobilised by shame but guilt allows you to look at what you have done and do something to make sure it doesn't happen again. While shame invites the situation to stay the same, guilt opens the doors for taking responsibility and making change. Shame is focussed narrowly on how we ourselves are feeling. Guilt

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opens out into caring about the well-being of others as well as ourselves.

Competition

Men are often validated by how successful they are in the workplace or on the sports field. Listen to the conversation at any party and you are likely to hear discussion on work, how well someone is doing, who is in line for promotion, how much money someone is making, which team won, who was the best player, and so on.

Fear of the Unknown

It is never comfortable facing the hidden parts of ourselves. There is the fear of what you will discover, whether you will like what you see and whether you will be able to do anything about it anyway. Perhaps it is better buried where it doesn't get in anyone's way. It takes a great deal of courage and strength to face up to this part of yourself and unless you do, you are destined to keep making the same old mistakes.

One of the challenges is whether you will allow fear to stifle your change or whether you will take courage and face it. With fear you can either wait for something that may or may not happen, and so do nothing, or gather your strength to understand and conquer it.

Fear of Being Alone

Facing up to the responsibility for your abusiveness may require you to be apart from your family until you are able to guarantee their safety. It can be scary to realise that love for your family may require you to leave them. Also, stopping your violence and threats may make it safe for your partner to make the decision to leave you, taking the pain of her experiences and memories with her.

Strategies for Overcoming Blocks

Block	Action
<i>Resentment</i>	Work out who or what you resent. What are their intentions towards you?; for example, many men feel resentment towards their partners or the courts. What these other people are really saying is that abusive behaviour needs to stop before more people are hurt. I see this as a caring gesture. How would you come to see it in this way?



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The Blocks to Change



<i>Pride</i>	Is it real pride — facing what has happened — or false pride — hiding behind a lie? Be honest with yourself and those around you.
<i>Embarrassment</i>	Accept that we all get embarrassed at times. Laugh it off and accept you have made a mistake. Admit you feel embarrassed. What messages encourage you to be embarrassed?
<i>Patterns of the past</i>	Work out how these affect you. Be aware of how these influence your thinking. Examine situations where you react and identify which script or pattern is operating.
<i>I'll never change</i>	Look at the things you have managed to change. Think about what helped you to change. Don't give up.
<i>Competition</i>	Think about your need to win. Can you see a situation where all of you are winners? Explore what would stop you compromising.
<i>Fear of the unknown</i>	What is the worst thing that could happen? Talk to others who know something about changing.
<i>Intimacy</i>	Look at the ways you avoid intimacy. Try talking to someone close to you about your inner thoughts.
<i>Shame</i>	Feel guilty about what you have done but not shameful about yourself. Use your guilt to work out what you will do to make sure you act in a responsible safe way next time.

Questions to Ponder

- How will I resist blaming others for my behaviour?
- Am I man enough to take on the challenge of change?
- How will I recognise a block when it threatens to undermine the work I have done in standing up against abusive patterns of behaviour?

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