

The Old Rule Book for Men



Men learn very early on in life that masculinity and femininity have very clear boundaries, and that there are clear rules and roles to follow. By the age of six, boys are very clear about the differences between boys and girls, men and women. You will have learnt the contents of the Old Rule Book — the guidelines that, for better or worse, are used to steer our behaviour

Rules change over time to fit the circumstances, with some rules clearly becoming outdated. When I was at school, hair length was a major issue. Boys' hair wasn't allowed to extend over the ears or collar. We found very creative ways to deal with this rule. We would tuck it behind our ears, brush it inside our collars and avoid the Principal. If we were caught (and we often were), we would go to the barber and get him to cut off as little as possible. We often had to make more than one trip as we attempted to push the rules as much as we could. We believed that the old rule was outdated and took the risk of challenging it.

In the same way, many men are now looking closely at the Old Rule Book for being a man and considering its current usefulness, while other men grimly cling to their Old Rule Book, finding it too scary or too hard to let it go. Men have not had a choice about this blueprint. Kevin Ireland, in *One of the Boys* (edited by Michael King), summed this up very well in describing what it was like for him growing up in the 1930s:

"The men would come home and in house after house, street after street, night after night, I would turn sick with fright as I biked back through the yells and bellows. The favourite instrument of torture was the razor-strop ... I've seen the backs of small boys whipped black and blue for little reason and no prospect of reform.

The creepy feature of the punishment was that it was not carried out in a temper or in the heat of the moment. It was like a legal execution: performed long after the crime, premeditated, merciless and clinical. Unlike a legal execution, however, it was performed without a trial.

Transgressions were corrected with irrational severity, the fist sometimes followed the boot. Occasionally you got more of a hammering than a beating. Our house was the sixth in the street, counting the corner section, and I remember my brother once being kicked past each of them like a human football — lifted up into the air on the toe of my father's boot. The viciousness of the sentence was out of all proportion to the trivial crime, but was quite in keeping with the habits of the times. In fact we thought our father a hard man, but a bloody sight softer than the child-bashers all about us." (pp. 90—91).

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So what is this Old Rule Book? What are the ideas, values and beliefs that are in it? Are there adapted versions or is it the same for all? In summary, the Old Rule Book teaches us that:

- men are more important than women;
- men are more entitled to respect, loyalty and services than others — they expect to be in charge and others to take second place;
- men don't have to take responsibility for the social and emotional climate in relationships; they can rely on others to face these social and emotional responsibilities;
- it is acceptable for men to dodge responsibility and blame their actions on to other people, events or factors.

Clearly, what these beliefs do is trap both men and women into a narrow range of choices about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. When men or women choose to step outside of these old messages they risk being judged by others who still adhere to the old rules. It takes courage to stand up against these expectations from the Old Rule Book. To not do so invites men to stay in the system that perpetuates abusive ways to relate to others.

The Traditional Man's Old Rule Book

1. Men are biologically superior to women, and so better at activities using physical strength (the myth of the hulk).
2. Men's thinking is rational and logical and superior to women's thinking, which is emotive and illogical. (Men can't really understand women.)
3. A man's image is based upon being more powerful, being fiercely competitive, dominant and controlling. (If you are none of these things then questions may be asked.)
4. Masculinity rather than femininity is the more valued gender identity to have — men rule OK.
5. Work and career success are the mark of a man. (Watch out for redundancy and unemployment.)
6. Self-esteem is established through achievement, competence and success.
7. A natural order exists whereby men are expected to assume control over others — especially their family, children — and their environment.



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8. A man who needs help to deal with issues or problems is weak, vulnerable and incompetent — the myth of ‘I must do this all on my own’.
9. Little and big boys don’t cry. There is a limit on expressing emotion
10. Communication based on sharing feelings, intuitions, and physical non-sexual contact is to be avoided. (I don’t understand it so it must be wrong.)
11. Sexuality is performance and goal oriented. Intimacy and sensuality are of lesser importance.
12. Intimacy and sharing with other men means either homosexuality, or that the other man will take advantage in a competitive setting.
13. It is acceptable for men to use their power, dominance and violence to keep control inside and outside the home.
14. Real men are tireless, invincible and keep working regardless of the personal or health risks. (Real men die early of heart attacks, lung cancer, alcoholism, strokes.)

| Traditional Gender Prescriptions (after Alan Jenkins) | |
|--|---|
| Male | Female |
| Physical: Strong, tough, powerful, muscular Ruggedly handsome | Weak, gentle, helpless, dainty, demure, petite, vulnerable, cute Graceful, sensual, sexy, pretty |
| Status: Ownership – more entitled Dominant – in authority Leader Independent, free Protector | Property – less entitled Submissive, demure Follower Dependent Protected |

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| Male | Female |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Interpersonal style: Active; a doer | Passive, receiver, responder to male |
| Direct and assertive | Indirect, female wiles |
| Worldly, experienced | Inexperienced |
| Bold, adventurous, daring | Retiring, modest, self-conscious |

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