

Conversations Surrounding Toxic Gender Roles

by Delia Kropp
www.therealdelia.com

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Hello everyone. My name is Delia Kropp. I am a Chicago-based actress, and advocate for my transgender community.

With Ada's kind permission, I'm not offering a story or anecdote. Instead, I want to share one observation about our subject, one strongly held conviction, and what I hope is some practical advice.

The observation: having lived as both a cisgender man and a transgender woman, I can assure you that everyone on the gender spectrum wants out of this trap. Call it toxic masculinity or toxic femininity we are all imprisoned. Even those who by their privilege seem to benefit most, would probably opt out, if they knew they could.

The conviction: don't settle for the status quo. Since the 1970s I've watched men and women battle over shifting gender norms. Since beginning my gender journey in 2004 I've gone from not feeling man enough, to sometimes not feeling woman enough. And now, at the age of 63, I've reached the point where I strongly feel that we all need to feel like we're enough.

The advice: Proceed as if we can indeed do something about it. That we can address gender roles with our teenage sons and daughters about to begin dating, with the boss who won't change the bro culture at work, or the partner that's long since fallen silent in our marriage.

The hardest part is getting started. Personally, I am a great believer in the power of personal conversation to effect real, positive change.

What I offer isn't about the systems, not about leveraging structures in government or your workplace. I'm talking about those difficult conversations everyday, where specific people are the issue, and those people need to be part of turning things around.

We also need to understand the difference between a conversation, and a fight. A fight is any situation, physical or verbal, structured so that someone walks away a winner. A debate is a fight. A conversation is about establishing connection, where both parties better understand each other, and are willing to move forward together.

Remember this, too: its very easy for a conversation to degenerate into a fight. Its much, much harder for a fight to ascend into a conversation. No, makeup sex after a fight doesn't count; neither does

contrition, or guilt. Conversations lead to breaking new ground, not temporary reversals in behavior, no matter how gratifying.

But if you feel that personal connection is possible, how do you prepare? Here are a few thoughts:

1: Frame your conversation in terms of the people, and their feelings. Personally, I don't even like the term toxic masculinity roles because it reduces human interaction to a systemic abstraction, and you can't work with an abstraction. Again, remember that in a conversation you're addressing specific people making life so miserable: for you, and possibly for themselves, too.

2: Talking about what it means to be male or female means your conversation will be all about emotions. Yes, prepare to address the behaviors, company policies, bad habits around the house, or any objective problems but first, address the reality of the talk itself. The minds of everyone in this conversation, yours too, will likely be engaged in survival mode. Fight, freeze or flight. As you proceed, feelings of fear, shame, loss, anger, and so forth may come into play. Expect this. Prepare for it.

3: Connection itself is your goal. Its great to have an objective, yes, the outcomes you desire, but no change happens where there is no trust, no personal connection. That's what you want.

4. Establishing connection in a potential minefield of emotions involves personal vulnerability. When we discuss what its like being male or female in this world, connection will ask a lot of everyone at the table.

I strongly urge you to create a vulnerability Checklist:

1. Who do you feel holds the most power in the situation? Be specific. If its in the workplace, who can get the other reprimanded, or even fired? If its personal, who is the strongest physically? Economically? Who in the discussion has the strongest personality, and is most likely to dominate the conversation verbally, or by their silence? And in terms of outcomes, who holds the most power to affect actual change? Is this power equal or asymmetrical?

2. Protect yourself. Ask, am I physically safe, and if not, what can I do to protect myself? Do I feel emotionally safe; What triggers are likely to fire off during this talk? What can I do stay brave in the conversation, and not let things degenerate into a fight either?

3. Related to this, what third parties can help? Why a third party? For perspective. . Who are my allies to talk with before and after to foster my sense of safety, reality, and maintain the courage to achieve connection?

This brings up a key point. Preparing yourself is essential, but this is a dialogue. Ultimately you cannot see yourself, and the situation, entirely from the other's perspective. If you could, things probably might have been resolved already.

Let's talk about the conversation itself. The brilliant Adar Cohen works as a moderator in very difficult high-conflict situations worldwide. He operates under three principles I believe can stand us in good stead, advocating for ourselves.

1. Lean into the Conflict. Lay out the situation in terms of how makes you feel. Don't hold back, and don't reference systemic things. Keep it personal.

2. You know nothing. Or at least, proceed as if you don't. In our gender related talks, its entirely possible that you really don't understand how the other side feels. Invite them to share.

3. Listen. Do not be afraid of silence. If the conflict is difficult, it may take the other party awhile to work through the vulnerabilities you've already assessed, to feel safe in the situation and summon up their own courage. Give them that space.

Once you've established some connection, continue to lean into the conflict. Articulate more specifics, the behaviors, policies, whatever it is that makes you feel as you do. Invite the other to reflect on these, and listen to their possible solutions. If these do not meet your needs, lean into the conflict again, articulate how those make you feel. And repeat.

Outcomes. Its entirely possible that no practical solutions are reached with the first conversation, and thats Ok. But don't settle. Request another talk, either formally scheduled or, if the feelings around the table are big and complex, within a window you deem appropriate. Don't let things just float, and set the unspoken precedent that working through vulnerabilities is not worth the difficulty, and cannot lead to resolution. Try again.

Sometimes, sadly, the outcome of a conversation is that the other party truly does not have your best interests at heart. Their strongest allegiances may be with the company, their parents, the church, or other friends at school. If the conversation reveals this, get help: your attorney, counselor, whatever seems appropriate. Or just get out.

Whatever you do, begin. Do not stay trapped. You can find your way to a better place. Thank you.