

Research question 1 = *why did you join your men's group?*

→ Analysis ↓

→ *What caused/ causes participants to join/ attend their men's group?*

Current or Most Recent Cause: Individual Factors

As illustrated in the photo above, the final concept emergent in relation to joining men's groups are *individual factors*. This theme is conceptualised as the latest – and final – link, in a causal chain that led participants to men's groups.

The primary way that participants were negatively affected by 'prior concepts', was in the area of 'relationship' and therefore this is the major element of the individual factors concept. The remaining two elements are 'psychological health' and 'addiction' and these are conceptually and as being subsumable into 'relationship' (*see model 1*)

Relevant sub concept 1, *Relationship difficulties*: Almost unanimously, participants in this research outlined relationship difficulties of one sort or another as immediate catalysts for seeking out and joining men's groups and for their continued involvement in them. For coherence, relationship in this instance refers to romantic relationship and marriage as well as the fruits of these relationships, their children. (Other significant and relevant relationships are referred to throughout this and other chapters).

Thus out of 23 relevant participants, 19 reported significant difficulties with respect to forming or maintaining long-term relationship with partners. Of the thirteen participants that married, 6 had experienced divorce or permanent separation, while another three reported significant relationship difficulties with their wives. Of the 7 single participants – most of whom are approximately forty years of age - four spoke of a consistent difficulty in

forming any type of romantic relationship and three revealed experiences of being unable to cope with or manage such relationships.

	Married (13)	Co-hab (3)	Single (7)	total participants (23)
divorce/ separation	6			
temporary separation	3			
difficulty forming relationships			4	
difficulty maintaining relationships	3	2	3	
total	12	2	7	19

One of these single men, is John and during our interview he stated

*I'm forty four now..I'm out of another relationship, inte..an into another one...em..an
I can't see this goin anywhere...it's only two weeks old*

Over the years John has met plenty of women but “all I was using them was for sex”. John desires a strong and enduring relationship with a woman – and is sure his failure to achieve this to date, is due to aspects of his upbringing and how he was effected by them.

John's father – a man who controlled others because of the control and fear he previously experienced in his own upbringing – lived on the basis of a 'survival of the fittest' mentality and where, as a family, they would do absolutely anything to survive. The quality of John's relationship to his father consisted of one where “he instructed and I followed” and John strove greatly to maximise his fitness capital and at the same time gain his father's approval.

*I learned huge amounts...like I was shootin rabbits at seven years of age, I was
kinda..I caught me first..salmon..when I was seven..I was kinda like..exposed to a
lot..at thirteen..I could unload an articulated lorry in thirteen minutes with a
forklift..deyeknowwhatImean..I took..I had..I took on responsibility*

However there was price to pay for this particular focus and way of life and for John, the price was a fracture – first and foremost - in his relationship with himself (or parts of himself) and following that a difficulty in relating to others.

As such

at some stage I just cut off from feelings..or from my body

He then outlined how his connection - or relationship - with his intellectual self contrasted with lack of connection with his emotional self:

*I'm quite good at articulating things..ye know at..I have a good vocabulary
for..stuff..maybe..that's how I got the computer analyst job..I'm able to understand
things..[I can] make a hundred decisions a day in business...but when it comes te
[human issues] I could do a 'pros and cons' list till the cows came home, but I still
couldn't make a decision..about..personal relationship..I can observe..yeknow...I..but*

there's a disconnect..ct.. I can..I can look at myself, and observe, and describe and everything, and have it 'right'....so what

John summarised his connection and relationship difficulties thus:

I'm looking at everything through a pane of glass, disconnected from it

Through men's groups and other endeavours, John is attempting to reconnect with his emotional self. He believes that if he succeeds in doing so he will be better able to connect with and sustain relationship with others. Reconnecting with this aspect of himself – after decades of rejecting or ignoring it – is no quick or straightforward matter and he likens it to a 'defrosting' process.

I don't want to live my life like that, but I am trying to..get back in..and I am feeling a lot more but with feelings I get overwhelmed with them then....like I went to bed the other..like I don't think I get depressed...but I ended up..like the other day..I haven't worked in nearly four months..the other day I went to bed at half eleven in the morning..for a half an hour..I..just..I felt wrecked..an now I get a tightness in me neck, or, yeknow (breaths out strongly), jez, I..fuckin hell..what's goin on here like..I donno, maybe that's part of the defrosting process..well I know I'm definitely..it's all about body for me...gettin back into the body..that's what works..and being gentle but I'm not very gentle on myself or other people

Tony married and had four children, the eldest of which died of a heroin overdose in his early twenties. As a husband and father, Tony's upbringing didn't equip him with the skills and temperament needed to sustain intimate relationships. On the contrary, what he learned was sometimes destructive.

Now divorced for many years, this interview took place in tony's mothers home, where he once again resides.

I was violent wit me wife..I was violent towards me kids. I've been..in scrapes all the bleedin time..through drink mostly..yeknow..mostly drink related

At the time Tony had no idea why he treated his loved ones so badly. It left him confused, feeling guilty and experiencing self-hatred. He wanted to change and eventually he sought and received help. As a result of this step, he came to understand that as a young boy and adolescent, he connected with - and developed - some aspects of his personality and temperament and failed to connect with - and develop - others. Tony conceptualises this in terms of learning

my father woulda been..fuckin violent here..at this very house..that's where I learned..I learned that here..I've done the exact same thing..I've went to the pub an come back..fuckin lashed out..just..simply..probably because the pub was closed..and I'm not happy anymore, yeknow...an yet I claim to love this..womam. That's where it all..yeknow..[comes from. It] spirals outa control..it's..same old, same old..they're learned behaviours..that's what I've learned them te be

Underscoring the persistence of intergenerational learning - and indeed the validity of it as a relevant and real psychological concept - one of Tony's two remaining sons is now violent towards his partner and abusing drugs. Furthermore, this couples two young children are witnessing these behaviours and displaying signs of suffering as a result.

Noel similarly decided to enter men's groups because he was experiencing difficulties with his intimate relationships and didn't understand why.

I went into the men's group initially because I was having marriage difficulties and relationship difficulties..I thought I was goin te be happily married for ever and ever and all of a sudden that doesn't seem te be happenin

Noel was left deeply disturbed by these relationship problems. Beyond the immediate emotional fallout, he was primarily shaken because upon getting married Noel was determined to do whatever it took to make sure his marriage worked. However, when he began to attend a men's groups as a result of his difficulties, he soon discovered that many of the efforts and sacrifices he made to make his marriage work, were having precisely the

opposite affect. Furthermore, Noel also identified the psychological roots of his dysfunctional behaviours and how they were learned as a result of his first 'marriage experience'.

As a child Noel witnessed frequent and intense rows between his parents, which were usually connected in some way to money.

my mother and father would have fuckin raging rows, right..shoutin, fightin..fuckin terrified..I'd sit on the stairs listenin to them rowin...I literally would feel like I needed te shit meself

As a result of these and other similar experiences Noel developed "a core way of being" that essentially consisted of being – or trying to be – a better husband than he perceived his father to have been. Therefore when it came to issues that he believed his father had mismanaged - such as money, alcohol and resolving conflict - in his own marriage, Noel's focus was on acting - and becoming - the opposite to his father.

when I grew up then and got married myself..all the money I had went to my wife to run the house..so I was like..completely..the opposite te me Da..wasn't drinkin..always changing the babies nappies..doin..fuckin..the whole thing

Also

when I got married I couldn't handle rowing..I couldn't handle arguments with my wife..here's all me money..what do you want..no, it doesn't matter [what I want]..what do you want, we'll do that..right. I [would] back down completely..because back in the day my Da'd fuckin scream..tell me mother te fuck off te the pub

As a result of his present marriage difficulties - and working through them in a men's group - Noel now realises that it was inaccurate to place so much blame and responsibility on his father and that his mother and deeper cultural factors were also at play. Such realisations subsequently led Noel to accept that he too did not have full power and responsibility to make his marriage work and that the belief that he had, was not only doomed to fail but was also likely to cause problems through the mode of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

Furthermore, he now recognises the Freudian aspect of a life led seeking the approval of a mother.

I think what got me inte..got me inte..difficulties, was this thing about..no..no, I'm doin everything I can here..I'm workin really hard for us to be happy..and now we're gonna be happy..so if I do this we must then be happy..and then when ye figure out, it doesn't work like that..it's like..what the fuck..I've given..everything..in terms of energy..like, gettin up..lookin after the kids..an that..all that...I'm sayin that..me thinkin that if ye do everything that you're supposed te do, you're guaranteed that things are goin te work out all right.. because ye deserve it..an then findin out..fuck, it doesn't work out like tha.. I was still tryin te..please my mother..an still tryin te say, 'I'm not me Dad'.. I'm not me father

Asoutlined above, Eddie, an 'only child', was 7 when his father died and his mother became depressed. Eddie's reaction to these difficult circumstances was to decide to repress his emotional needs for the sake of his mother. One way he did this was by distraction and by challenging himself intellectually, initially in school and later in his professional life. Eddie spent thirty years in a challenging job, managing finance within a large corporation and during this period he experienced consistent levels of stress and anxiety as a result of both work stress and what he calls 'domestic' stress. Although he attempted to bury or distract himself from thee problemsn by burying himself in work, it did result in serious health problems for Eddie and relationship difficulties with his wife. It was not until he became redundant during the recent financial crisis that Eddie came face to face with his psychological difficulties in a sustained manner that necessitated him dealing with them. He found this experience extremely difficult and at times overwhelming, resulting in him occasionally contemplating suicide.

I was going fucking mad at home..the problem was..it was that all my problems were there..and when they were there, in [my] face, I couldn't see..[I] can't see round the problem

The primary cause for Eddie being overwhelmed with his problems was also a consequence of distracting himself from them for so many years and this was an inability to conceptualise and communicate what these problems were and how they were effecting him.

Consequently throughout his marriage Eddie and his wife experienced significant communication difficulties, leading to a frustration and tension. Thus although experiencing significant stress in his career - stress to the point of an impending stroke, according to his GP - according to Eddie

the bigger problem I have is..talking at home..I..the..the words I hate my wife te ask me is, 'we have to talk'.. 'what'll we talk about'.. I go blank

By going to men's groups, Eddie is receiving an education – albeit an informal one –in psychology. This has resulted in him understanding his own psychological history and present mental state better. In turn, Eddie now has more to talk about with his wife and better, more relevant communication is occurring between them, strengthening their relationship

Now, I can now go home and talk..these things (men's groups), give me ammunition to go home and talk..I have found out..by goin to these groups..[they give] me things to talk about..puts ideas into me head..I can..I can talk about..emotions..now..that I've come across..for me, as I say..it gives me..the words, the concepts, the..the..the theories (laughs)

Relevant sub concept 2, *Psychological Health*:

As a young boy Franny suffered the loss of both his parents. One of a set of twins, Franny describes himself as the third boy in his family but fourth child: his twin was a girl and he felt a degree of being forgotten upon the arrival of the first girl in the family. As a young boy and adolescence Franny was bullied by other kids, including being mocked on account of being a

twin and therefore not being 'the full shilling'. He struggled for many years with his self-esteem and self-confidence and when he married later, he found this relationship difficult. Franny's reasons for joining men's

goes back, way back te..te when eh..I was havin difficulty in my..in my own life..eh..when I was struggling around eh..addiction and eh..I was struggling in my marriage..and when I left the home

Although Franny eventually returned to his wife and children, his difficult psychological state brought him to the brink of death

I tried te commit suicide yeknowhamean..twice..but..yeknow..it didn't..it didn't work..and I was [sub] pposed te be sane in mind..I know what it's like te be isolated..I know what it's like te be..sittin on a bridge goina commit suicide deyeknowhaimean, so..deyeknowhaimean so I know wha tha..tha..tha tunnel yeknowhaimean..tha..tha..tha..that..tha..tha..dark tunnel

Franny believes that the words – and time – given to him by a concerned stranger on a bridge, is the sole reason why he is alive today. These days Franny is both a counsellor and men's group member and is motivated by his experiences to help other men. For Franny helping men is simple and based on "giving them time" and helping them counter societal prejudice by helping them to become proud as men.

Neil's psychological difficulties resulted in engagement with medical professionals at an early age, receiving extensive psychiatric treatment over many years. This resulted in him and his difficulties being conceptualised in terms of brain disorder and Neil being "labelled" with bi-polar depression and psychosis. However, as a result of his own recovery journey – which included men's groups – Neil rejects medical conceptualisation in favour of something more meaningful to him. Thus, although from a privileged background in terms of finance and education

from the emotion side, I was completely neglected....em....an some awful stuff went on..traumas that happened in childhood but em that were never dealt with..the trauma of neglect, the trauma of violence, the trauma of abuse.....emotional and physical. Basically as a kid..a child, I think, I like a lot of men em and women I

suppose, em didn't get what they needed as a child...ye know..not what they wanted, just what they needed (laughs)

As a result of this start in life, Neil experienced low-self esteem - to the point of self-hatred and suicidal ideation – and various “problems of living”.

when ye hated yourself as I did as a kid.....em...that's not a great start..it's goin to be tough to do jobs...relationships..I had..suicidal thoughts over the whole of my life

Neil conceptualises recovery - or healing - in terms of rectifying early learning and a “journey from self-hatred to self-love”. One of the main routes that Noel takes towards self-love is to nurture self-acceptance and he finds the particular structure and process of men’s groups valuable in that regard.

Like Neil, Eoin has suffered acute psychological distress over many years for which he also received psychiatric conceptualisation and treatment. In addition Eoin has learned over time to reject a medical perspective in favour of one that has emerged as a result of experience – and reflection on experience – and is more meaningful to him.

Therefore, as a child and adolescent, Eoin experienced significant abuse and neglect within the home in the form of physical and psychological abuse from his mother and neglect from his father. The overriding implication of this experience was a deep sense of confusion and insecurity and a ‘vicious cycle’ of experiencing himself as anxious, depressed and “feeling like a freak”.

As an adult, Eoin decided to try to deal with these experiences - and their causes - in ways that made sense to him. Initially these meant endeavouring to understand the nature of his problems and to do this he began talking about his experiences within Alcoholics Anonymous (this despite him believing that he is not an alcoholic). During this phase, Eoin believes that he has come to terms with many aspects – and legacies – of his relationship with his mother and he is currently seeking to have similar understanding and resolution with respect to his paternal relationship and its legacy. This is a significant reason for his current attendance at a men’s group.

he [Eoin's father] was never about and he never showed me anything..he didn't really teach me how to be a man, as such. I was kinda left to me own devices so I was very

confused about..just very simple shit..at a very basic level..I wasn't sure how to behave or how to be a man, yeknow..what that meant..or how to..how te stand into that and..I thought the group would be a good place how te learn how to do that properly. [I wanted to] get a bit of guidance..in how I am..are the things that I think are wrong with me..are they really that wrong..and the things that I think are right..are they right

Colin is a thirty eight year old single man with a highly successful career in the professions. Colin's background in terms of family and wider community would mirror other participants, though not to the same extent. Thus although for example Colin's father could be "a very angry man" and he experienced some 'lack' of 'mothering', violence was not something Colin experienced in his formative years.

However, as a result of his start in life, Colin believed it necessary to excel in school as a means of attracting positive attention from others and a coherent identity for himself. In time the inordinate amount of energy he put into being the top student in his school caused him psychological difficulties, in particular as the result of his Leaving Cert performance. Not doing as well as he expected in this exam (this despite getting enough points for medicine at a top university), caused Colin deep anxiety and depression and these psychological states – or the fear of them occurring again - persist to this day. Consequently, In a high powered and 'testing' job, Colin has come to realise that he needs to nurture his 'whole self' in order to achieve the more rounded concept of success that he also has come to realise is in his best, long-term interest. It is for these realisations – and how to achieve them - that Colin attended a men's group.

I've a very delicate psyche like..I know that I have to look after my mental health..like there's lots of things I do now..I have to..keep doing because..it has be protected, yeknow..there's a lot of stress in my job now so..I just have to..really mind it, yeknow..I know as a person I've got huge abilities and I've got loads of intelligence and I've got all of these things but the bit..the bit..my..my handicap or my Achilles heel is just le..if stress gets too..yeknow..anxiety..overcomes me and performance anxiety and all that..those kinda things..I need to keep them..so like, for instance I'd be very careful now about

(inhales) eh (exhales) I always sleep well, I always eat pretty well, I don't drink too much..I would've done one-on-one counselling..a fair bit of it before doing the men's group and then..I suppose Sammy suggested doing the group and..I'd no eh..hesitation in doing it 'cause I kindef..be interested te hear other people's stories

Relevant sub concept 3, *Addiction*: After years of partaking in men's groups, Liam is now aware of what led him to have an "addictive relationship with work and something close to an addictive relationship with alcohol". Growing up with a father who was violent and a mother who was unable to be affectionate and nurturing to her young son, Liam experienced "isolation" and "utter and absolute loneliness". His young minds attempt to make sense of, cope with, and manage this scenario involved a degree of sympathising with his mother and concomitant behaviour on his part.

I remember workin it out, somewhere along the way, well I adapted my task to be not to create any more stress for me mother..that was my job..as a youngfella..not to create any hassle for me mother..an..by doin...te act that out, I just became invisible

One of earliest manifestations of this rationale and behaviour emerged during Liam's school days

I learned really well yeknow..I learned really well..yeknow..don't cause hassle and get your head down, work yer ass off, yeknow an..I got ten honours in me Inter

The same thought processes and behaviour evolved as Liam himself evolved into an adult man and previously adaptive behaviours became less so. Now becoming invisible and 'disappearing into work' had knock-on effects on his relationship with his wife and children.

I was doin that [working hard and earning significantly] but it was at a massive cost, in terms of isolation, in terms of shite relationships. I fucked me relationship with Mary, my wife, I had really distant relationship with me children..an eh..I remember realising that the relationship I had wit me son, who was then ten...em.. that I'd actually recreated everything I didn't want.I had recreated my relationship wit me father, with him and that just stopped me in me tracks

As Liam indicates, it was realisations around the quality of the relationship he had unintentionally – and unconsciously - created with his son that was the main deciding to no longer run and hide into addiction. Consequently the intergenerational transmission of trauma and emotional pain - culminating in the suicidal ideation of his ten year old son - was the major catalyst for him seeking the help and support of men's groups.

Phil's decision to join a men's group similarly goes back to childhood - and beyond - which he describes as a "difficult" start in life. He also coped by taking a route into addictive behaviour, which manifested mostly with regard to gambling, but also included alcohol and drug taking and in later years "a huge pornography problem".

As an adult Phil eventually began to recognise that his addictions were causing more problems than they purported to solve and he sought help for these and the underlying issues that caused them. After a significant period taking part in various '12 step' groups - particularly gamblers anonymous ("*I'd be dead but for GA*") - he joined two of the participating men's groups.

Mood altering drugs as an element of difficult family and cultural circumstances were a reality of life for Jimmy from the very start

what I got brought up in, was me Da batterin me Ma..me Ma batterin us and a lot of alcoholism and me Ma's fuckin fridge full of Valium an all this..I thought (laughs) this was normal

Raised initially in the tenements and then in one of the vast estates built to replace them on the periphery of the city, Jimmy believes that such problems were to some extent culturally – though not objectively - normal

probably every second house on the road had them problems, deye understand..so, it was reasonable normal. Now [however], we know that that actually is not normal..that's not a normal way te bring up children..the normal way is te love them an affirm them

Jimmy's 'culturally normal but objectively abnormal' upbringing included – or led to - drinking alcohol at an early age: he was 13 when he had his first drink and 15 when he first

got drunk. In time however, he graduated onto “hash, E’s and acid” while at the same time continuing to abuse alcohol. This behaviour eventually led to significant psychological and relationship difficulties to the extent that he had a nervous breakdown at nineteen and subsequent serious relationships difficulties with his wife and children.

Although off all drugs for the past eighteen years, jimmy still considers himself an addict – albeit a recovering one – and attends two NA meetings per week. To jimmy, these meetings - and the concepts and theories underpinning them- are crucial supports to ensure that he doesn’t repeat previous behaviours and patterns and instead keeps himself psychologically healthy and away from a need for mood altering substances. A further support is the men’s group that Jimmy helped found and maintain over many years and that helps him deal with the gendered – or masculine - aspect to his difficulties and recovery.

Donal’s story gives a very clear account of the purpose that addiction served for many participants. Sexually abused by a Christian Brother as a young boy, Donal suffered psychologically as a result, yet for cultural reasons had no way of dealing with or even expressing his psychological pain. As such, he needed – and found – some way of escaping from this pain until he was an adult and in a position to face his early trauma. Donal’s escape was initially alcohol and subsequently cocaine

Asked what the root cause of him ending up in a men’s group was, Donal replied:

I would think it would have been..I would think it would have come from a corruption around the age of 10..in me development..eh..meeting..having encounters with a wobbly Christian Brother...there was a definite switch in my behaviour..from being a model pupil..to...just not giving one flying fuck..an since that..until I stopped all

drugging..it was that I don't give two flying fucks..no one will tell me anything ever again

Eventually Donal decided that psychoactive and mood altering substances were 'no longer working' in the sense that, like a vicious circle, they were creating more and more problems that needed anesthetizing and escape from. Therefore he decided to stop and when he did, all his problems were laid out before him, to the extent that he was, initially at least, overwhelmed.

about four or five years ago I stopped that (cocaine addiction)..instantly..that realisation of me past..it all showed up in front of me..it was like all my hell-raising days came flashing up in front of me..and all the damage that I had caused..and I was in such a state of shock..I was shocked so much that I don't think I came out of the house for about two years..I was ashamed..I grew fat..eh..legs wouldn't walk..I thought I was going to die..an I was dying..I wasn't interacting with anybody..I was so ashamed of me..carry on

Eventually Donal came out of his house and sought help, eventually ending up in one of the studies participating men's groups. This led to him learning to face and understand the initial abuse he experienced and his subsequent coping and escape mechanisms. A 'work in progress' no doubt, Donal exhibits signs of coming to terms with the reality and pain of his life in the holistic - and indeed spiritual – conceptualisation so often evident found men's groups.

those two years..of nearly solitary confinement..eh..well I had nothin else ta practice but fuckin livin in the now..eh..so while I seen those two years as fuckin terrible black, dark years, I got a lot out of them..y'know..an now I understand about goin into the dark places..now I understand the shadow self..now I understand..the fuck..it's horrible to look at it..fuckin rocked me.....yeknow...as ye say part of the journey

In all cases participants were faced with challenging circumstances as soon as they came into the world and adaptation, presumably, began immediately. However limitations to human memory means that the data contains little information in respect of relevant concepts before the ages of four or five. However one participant in most cases participants report

Further evidence for the relevance of addiction is bullet pointed below:

- *I'm a bit of a perfectionist aswell (Andrew, p.14)*
- *I can't drink, I'm a recovering alcoholic (Martin, FG, p.28)*
- *one of the things that I got hooked on was..being responsible and doing things for praise..right, so being seen as being competent..so I was the manager of the..captain of the football team..because it's like's like a fuckin drug (Noel, p.14)*
- *I got lost in drugs from that..from twelve, thirteen up to twenty-eight..drink, hash..em, at fourteen/fifteen, acid..em, pharmaceut, like the, pharmaceutical drugs like diepal em..benzos..dyke..they were like, for, em..cancer patients (Freddie)*
- *where do you bring your pain..ye know..in 2013..as a man...an ye know..I I don't bring it to the pub anymore em..I don't bring it te..I don't wanna spew it out on others who don't deserve it..em..an I don't wanta bottle it up inside.. I think I need, I certainly....as a..as a man...who struggles with life and who..who..who finds life difficult...need..need places where I can bring my pain and, leave it there...ye know (laughs) over a period of time....and let it not destroy me or anyone else...em..an an*

and not run away from it like I probably did for years inte..inte..te drink and drugs...em...so it's [the men's group] very important..function.. for me..I knew I needed somewhere to go with this pain..I knew an I knew that all other ways had sortef failed whether it be yeknow eatin it, drinkin it, working it, relatship..relation-shiping it....yeknow, eventually I had to find somewhere I could just release it...talk about it..whether it's tears or anger or shoutin or...whatever....anyone can drink their pain...anyone can hi..yeknow..hit their pain off a wall..I did all those things, but it didn't, it didn't eh, it didn't get rid of it yeknow..an I do genuinely believe I'm carrying less as a result of of of of..em, one-on-one and men's group yeknow that's a very good combination ..for me (Neil)