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# PERSPECTIVES

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## The struggle with being male

*The image of an ideal '90s man ranges from feminine to fiendish, but most men lie somewhere hopelessly in-between.*

I have a friend who likes to talk. About all the women he's slept with, about all the hearts he broke at the clubs and about how much he doesn't care. He's a poster boy for men behaving badly, and that's the way he likes it. No smiling in photos, no commitments, no confessions. He's a brick wall of masculine energy. But like so many men, he's really a big sissy. Fashion is a priority, cologne litters the bathroom cabinet and hair takes 30 minutes to sculpt on a quick day. For a guy who cares about so little, he seems to put a lot of stock in what people — especially women — think of him. Frighteningly, my friend, while extreme, is a model to live by for most of his species. We men like to play up our independence and love for sports and hanging with the guys, but we're more like women — emotional, conscientious, insecure — than we care to admit. Witness the rise of the men's magazine. Not so much Playboy or Penthouse, but new kids on the block such as Details, Maxim and Gear. Hidden under a facade of beautiful, buxom women are tips on everything from making her scream your name in bed to picking the perfect suit for that big interview. The mags reinforce men's perception that they're all young, hip and handsome,

while at the same time calming their fears that they're not attractive enough, masters of the bedroom or of the wardrobe. The magazines present a paradox because they know that's how men are. It's socially irresponsible, but it's a publishing gold mine.

Many men would dispute this, of course. They'd say that surely a lot of men are secure in themselves, that they have no need for petty reassurances at the newsstand. I won't try to pin down the demons of a 40-year-old married father, but in the realm of 20- and 30-

something men, a repressed insecurity reigns supreme. To make matters worse, many men don't understand what they feel, or why they do the things they do. Ask any of the former sports heroes pumping iron in Esslinger why they come to the gym every day, and most won't be able to give an answer any more solid than "To get huge?" In the end, they may be there to impress women or fulfill some diluted image of what a man needs to look like, but articulating that fact, probably because it's so baffling, usually proves difficult.

To men's credit, however, their collective fears and obsessions come as much from external sources as they do from within. American males are torn between a society that values symbols of harsh masculinity such as the Rat Pack as national treasures, but yet pushes men to

constantly redefine their role in a post-feminism world.

It would seem that men aren't the only ones at odds with what constitutes a real man. No one wants to return to the days of martini-drinking, cigar-chomping brutes — although they're fun to think about — but even the most die-hard feminists shudder at the thought of a bunch of spineless, ultra-sensitive shemen walking around.

This all puts men, especially us young guys, in a bit of a quandary. We'd no doubt help ourselves a lot by just being ourselves, and responding to concerns from the fairer sex as they come up. But I'm not going to pretend this is easy.

For all you women out there, at a loss for words over men's many deficiencies, I'd urge a bit of understanding. Yes, we're guilty of creating a lot of our own problems, often comically so. But we also have the hardy task of living among confusion, where masculinity is a valued commodity, but apparently only in measured doses.

*Ashley Bach is a columnist for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.*

Opinion



Ashley Bach

