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These Men Are Waiting to Share Some Feelings With You

In meetings and retreats, chastened menfolk are working stuff out.

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This won't hurt a bit: A member of the ManKind Project is invited to explore his emotions with the help of others at a weekly meeting in Midtown Manhattan. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

By Hannah Seligson

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On a Monday night in a sparsely decorated room in Midtown Manhattan, a group of approximately 20 men including an endocrinologist, a sportscaster, a policeman and an employee of the United Nations were baring their souls.

"I've been digging deep with my girlfriend and we are having those talks about moving forward in our relationship, and I'm having nights where I can't sleep," said Andrew Cummings, 44, an opera singer in New York who has performed at Carnegie Hall.

"I'm angry that my health is deteriorating. I'm not ready to be an old man," said Jeff Nichols, 70, a former consultant.

"I'm checking in with some anger. I didn't get accepted to the Ashtanga Institute, and I smashed two candles, which I know isn't very yogic," said another man, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of professional repercussions.

Ranging in age from 30 to 70, the men were gathered as part of the ManKind Project (MKP), a 33-year-old nonprofit with 24 chapters in the United States and 11 regions abroad. It focuses on men's emotional well-being, drawing on elements like Carl Jung's theories of the psyche, nonviolent communication, breath work, Native American customs, and good old-fashioned male bonding. Minus ogling women, drinking or fist fighting, of course.

Ties that bond: a member exploring his emotions with others at an MKP weekly meeting. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

The goal, according to many affiliated with MKP, is to break down patriarchal and hierarchical ideas of masculinity. And the place to start is where another man, Socrates, did centuries ago: with the mandate of "know thyself."

MKP translates this as a process of cultivating awareness around one's emotions, so they aren't projected onto others in harmful and destructive ways. This is accomplished through a series of facilitated exercises, some of which involve props, aimed at bringing feelings to the surface and to hold a mirror to oneself.

Men, who are less likely than women to seek out individual therapy, are increasingly looking for outlets in this fraught cultural moment of political acrimony, widespread economic instability and major societal reckoning over their behavior.

The new popularity of mindfulness, yoga and wellness has helped men shift their focus away from work relationships, said Lucas Krump, 39, a founder of Evryman, a for-profit company that brings men together to talk about their feelings. (Mr. Krump used an exercise metaphor for his venture: "CrossFit for your emotions.")

Started in 2016 and now a B Corp (a business with a codified social mission), Evryman has grown to over 800 men in around 85 groups across 50 cities. Its slick website — black and white portraits of men, many of whom have the requisite millennial beard — touts a finding from psychology researchers that most men would rather be electrically shocked than be left alone with their thoughts. More sobering, in 2017 men committed suicide 3.5 times more often than women.

Get a grip: Members clutch a feathered stick. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

At MKP, membership is at an all-time high and enrollment is up 8 percent over last year, said Boysen Hodgson, the director of marketing and communications. "With Time's Up Now and #MeToo, many men know they have to be more accountable," Mr. Hodgson said. "A lot of them are saying, 'I don't want that to be me. I don't want that to be how men are seen in the world."

Eka Darville, 29, an actor on the Netflix show "Jessica Jones," has been involved with MKP since 2012. "The stoic male who doesn't express or share his emotions, I see that as being extremely detrimental," Mr. Darville said in a phone interview. "A lot of pathologies in society, such as entitled masculinity, are related to men who are repressed. The evolution from boyhood to manhood isn't something that naturally happens."

MKP helped him navigate becoming a father of two. "There is no way I could have done that without a brotherhood telling me all the bull I was projecting onto my wife but also hold me with compassion," he said.

Many participants in these groups, including Mr. Darville, first try them in the form of a weekend retreat: The commitment is low, the camaraderie is high, and it can feel reassuringly like a return to summer camp (with faint echoes of the poet Robert Bly's 1990 treatise, "Iron John").

MKP's retreat is the New Warrior Training Adventure, which has been completed by over 60,000 men: a two-day initiation of sorts that costs, on average, $675 and includes blindfolded walking tours and cold showers for those who choose. Some retreats have optional nudity, in an effort to promote healthy body image.

"The weekend is a little strange at first," recalled Zvika Krieger, 35, who attended one 11 years ago and now helps to facilitate the MKP retreats in the Bay Area, where he runs a technology policy organization. "You are pushed emotionally, but there is certainly nothing that happens you are ashamed of after."

Hugging it out at a ManKind Project meeting. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

After completing the New Warrior Training Adventure, many men join Integration Groups, or I-Groups, where they continue, on a weekly basis with the guidance of a trained peer facilitator, the "work," as it is called in MKP, that was started during those 48 hours.

I-Groups are attended not just by woke, liberal elites on the coasts. Kansas City, Mo.; the greater Carolinas; Atlanta; Indianapolis; Milwaukee; Memphis; and Louisville, Ky., all have sizable groups, according to the organization. Evryman has a half a dozen groups in Montana and over 20 in the Northern Rockies. In March, one of its retreats will take place in Logan, Ohio, the first in the Midwest.

The Evryman weekend is called the Open Source Retreat ($475 to $975, depending on accommodations) and brings together 50 men and eight leaders who have completed something called Men's Emotional Leadership Training (MELT) "to set aside cultural norms and be transparent, honest, and vulnerable with each other," to quote from the company's literature. The goal is to "leave feeling like we shed 30 pounds of emotional baggage."

Let It Flow

Ebenezer Bond, 42, the founder of a marketing agency, said that until getting involved with Evryman he hadn't had a cathartic drag-it-out cry since he was 16. The retreat he attended in late 2016 opened the floodgates.

"I was skeptical at first — I even deleted an initial email with the invitation to the weekend," Mr. Bond said. "But it was the single most transformational experience I've had as an adult male. I was able to express emotions in front of other men, something I'd never done before."

Several members chose to be "saged" before an Evryman meeting. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

Simon Isaacs, who was invited by Mr. Bond to a later retreat, said he "panicked" when he learned, five minutes before he arrived at Race Brook Lodge in Sheffield, Mass., that there would be no consumption of alcohol and minimal cellphone use.

"I thought, 'What am I supposed to do: express myself?'" he said. Now Mr. Isaacs, 38, a founder of the millennial parenting site Fatherly, attends a weekly Evryman group and calls it part of his "emotional retraining."

Perhaps the biggest endorsement is Mr. Isaacs's wife, who has told him to "keep going." "I'm a work in progress," he said.

Chimezie Uzodinma, 32, an information-technology professional in New York who has been involved with MKP for a decade, credited his weekly group for pulling him out of hopelessness and despair. "There was a moment when I thought I was going to die alone and I was very depressed," he said.

But MKP and Evryman are very clear that they are not offering group therapy. "We don't pretend to be counselors or therapists, but sometimes people come at the suggestion of their individual psychotherapist," said Scott Fried, a motivational speaker who works with at-risk teenagers and often facilitates his I-Group on Monday nights in New York.

Still, personal-development groups such as this have raised concerns about unlicensed therapeutic work. "There is no meaningful accountability for Large Group Awareness Training," Rick Alan Ross, an expert on cults, wrote in an email, using the term to refer to a personal training program that claims to help people reach their full potential.

Mr. Ross said he has received complaints about MKP and a similar group, the Sterling Institute's Men's Weekend, which bills itself as two days of "introspection, fun, heartbreak, and triumph. "

On the couch: Members "check in" at an Evryman meeting at a private residence in the East Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

However, elements of the MKP philosophy and curriculum have been used in state prisons since 2009 through the Freedom Within Prison Project, a nonprofit that helps incarcerated men work through their emotions.

The main facilitators of the prison groups are five men who credit MKP as the catalyst for their nonprofit. And in a 2010 peer-reviewed article about men's health and social outcomes, researchers concluded that "MKP-related beliefs and social support significantly predicated positive outcomes."

Eye Contact a Must

At Evryman, Mr. Krump said he and other organizers "intentionally didn't include spirituality" in their approach. "The groups, which don't have specific leadership, start with a rather agnostic meditation. Then participants share how they are feeling and try to identify where those sensations are appearing in the body.

Next is a more in-depth round in which the men are asked whether they have met "their stretch": a commitment or goal for the next week based on what the person had worked on in the group. These can vary from making time to do restorative yoga every day, to connecting on a deeper level with family over the holidays — something Peter Nesbit, 34, a finance executive at a software company, said he was able to do over Thanksgiving weekend with his parents in South Dakota.

Then each man is given around 10 minutes to talk more at length about what's going on with himself. Group members ask probing follow-up questions: "How do you feel? What do you need to let go of? What do you want? What do you need from the group?" The prodding often elicits frustration, anger and sadness. Screaming into a pillow is not uncommon.

"I'm just afraid to be with myself. I don't want to feel fragile and afraid," said Kevin Hermann, 27, an entrepreneur, at one Monday evening Evryman group at a Williamsburg loft.

There is something undeniably powerful about a group of people, let alone men, sitting and listening intently — cross-talk, interrupting and giving advice are highly discouraged — without distraction or interruption. And eye contact is a must.

This may sound like basic conversational etiquette, but "holding space," as it's called in the personal development world, is, at a minimum, cathartic in era of constant distraction and always looking for the next best thing. In some cases, it can feel quite profound.

There, there. ... A member is supported in meditation by Lucas Krump, left, and another participant in the group. Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

Sex, sexuality and relationships are big topics. "We have millennials come to groups or training whose introduction to sex has been through porn, and no one talked to them about the link between sex, intimacy and love," Mr. Krieger said.

Now in his 30s, Mr. Krieger, who also goes to therapy, says he feels lucky to have started the MKP when he was 24, before he was married or became a father. "I can now see when I'm shutting down, or I'm really getting defensive," he said.

And in the #MeToo era, issues of reconciling past sexual behavior come up, said Ben Fleisher, 40, who runs a men's group in Woodstock, N.Y.

"We had one situation where someone talked about how they reached out to a woman because he felt like he may have crossed the line, but the woman didn't think it was sexual assault," said Mr. Fleisher, 40, an alumnus of Sterling's Men's Weekend who works as an acupuncturist. "This topic in general is an area where we need to dig deeper. Many men are struggling to come to terms with #MeToo and how they feel complicit in abuses, even if they aren't the perpetrators, by not taking a more active stand for a woman's sovereignty."

Lest this all comes off as self-indulgent, devotees of men's groups say blunt-force honesty is something that keeps them coming back. "I'm very verbose and have a lot of opinions," said Mr. Krieger, who has been training for almost seven years to be in a volunteer leadership position in the MKP. "I started getting feedback that it was totally killing the energy in the circle and wasn't leaving room for other people. Since I'm the boss at work, no one is going to tell me that to my face."

Some are unflinching in requesting feedback. Instead of having a blowout party on his 50th birthday, Mr. Fried told his I-Group that he wanted each person to tell him something he needed to work on. Mr. Fried, now 55, said the experience made him realize that "I come with a lot of victimhood because I got infected with H.I.V. But the group has called me on that and helped me recognize that I'm a powerful man."

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