

M4

MODULE 4

BARBERSHOP TOOLKIT

ESTD 2025

MENTAL HEALTH &
EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION





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→ Why This Module Matter?

One of the most damaging aspects of rigid gender norms is the way they disconnect men from their emotional selves. From a young age, many boys are told to suppress vulnerability, avoid crying, and equate strength with emotional stoicism. This contributes to crises in men's mental health, including isolation, substance abuse, suicide, and gender-based violence.

This module aims to de-stigmatize emotional expression for men and people of all genders who internalize restrictive norms. It promotes emotional literacy, mutual support, and healing—not only for individual well-being but for building more compassionate communities and equitable relationships.

→ Learning Objectives

- + **By the end of this session, participants will:**
- + Understand the connection between emotional suppression, mental health, and harmful expressions of masculinity.
- + Expand their emotional vocabulary and build confidence in identifying and expressing feelings.
- + Practice tools to share emotions in safe, healthy ways—personally and professionally.
- + Recognize societal myths about masculinity and emotion and begin unlearning them.
- + Explore how emotional honesty supports stronger leadership, relationships, and allyship.

→ Who This Module Is For

- + Fathers, caregivers, and male mentors
- + Educators, coaches, and youth workers
- + First responders, social workers, and healthcare professionals
- + Men's support groups, peer counseling networks, and faith-based leaders
- + Workplace teams interested in building psychological safety

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

1. EMOTION WHEEL ACTIVITY

➔ **Goal:** Build emotional literacy by helping participants name their feelings beyond just “happy,” “sad,” or “angry.”

➔ How To Facilitate

- + Share an emotion wheel (a visual tool categorizing emotions by type and intensity). Briefly note that naming emotions improves regulation and communication, which supports men’s wellbeing and reduces barriers to seeking support.
- + Ask participants to choose 2–3 emotions they’ve felt recently—at home, at work, in friendships.
- + In pairs or small groups, invite them to reflect: How did you respond to these emotions? Were you able to express them? If not, why - norms about “toughness,” uncertainty about when/how to seek help, or lack of language? Practice one 10-second script to express a difficult feeling without apology.?

➔ Debrief Questions

- + What emotions are you most comfortable expressing? Least? What bodily cues help notice them earlier?
- + How were emotions talked about—or not—when you were growing up, and how has that shaped comfort with help-seeking today?
- + What’s one new emotion word you learned today?

➔ Facilitator Tip

- + Normalize all emotions. There are no “bad” feelings—only behaviors that can be harmful or helpful; naming feelings expands choices, supports regulation, and can make reaching out for support feel safer and more “on-script” for men.

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

2. CHECK-IN CIRCLES

➔ **Goal:** Create a regular, safe space for sharing feelings and building emotional trust.

➔ How To Facilitate

- + Gather in a circle (physical or virtual). Invite a brief grounding breath (3 inhales/exhales) to shift from “fixing mode” to listening.
- + Invite each participant to answer two questions:
 1. How are you feeling right now? Name 1–2 emotions and where they show up in the body.
 2. What’s something on your mind this week, and what support would feel helpful to receive (witnessing, empathy, or practical follow-up)?
- + One person speaks at a time. No interruptions, no advice, no fixing—just listening; peers reflect back one word they heard (“heard: anxious,” “heard: proud”) to normalize naming emotions

➔ Why This Works

- + Reinforces that emotional honesty is a leadership strength and counters harmful stoicism by normalizing help-seeking and shared language for feelings among men.
- + Builds team trust and belonging; men’s support groups show benefits for managing distress when spaces emphasize nonjudgmental listening and choice.

➔ Facilitator Tips

- + Open the circle by modeling vulnerability yourself (name one specific feeling and a simple need), and remind participants that passing is always okay.
- + Keep boundaries clear: this is not therapy; if strong distress emerges, acknowledge it and offer follow-up options after the circle (peer check-in or professional support), preserving the no-fixing norm in-session.

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

3. UNPACKING MASCULINITY MYTHS

➔ **Goal:** Surface and challenge internalized messages that help-seeking, emotional literacy, and wellbeing for men and boys.

➔ How To Facilitate

+ Ask participants: What messages did you receive about emotion and masculinity growing up?

Examples: “Big boys don’t cry,” “Man up,” “Don’t show weakness” “Solve it yourself,” “Therapy is weakness.”

+ Write these myths on a board or flipchart.

+ In groups, choose one myth and:

➔ Discuss its impact (e.g., delayed help-seeking, isolation, substance coping, anger masking sadness)

➔ Name who benefits from it and who it harms (e.g., peer status ideals or workplaces that reward stoicism vs. men’s mental health, partners, and families).

➔ Brainstorm an alternative belief (e.g., “Crying shows courage, not weakness.”)

➔ Debrief Questions

+ How have these myths shaped your behavior or relationships (e.g., not disclosing distress, avoiding counseling, overworking)?

+ What would change personally and in close relationships if one belief were released and replaced with a help-seeking, emotionally expressive script?

TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

4. EMOTION JOURNALING (OPTIONAL ADD-ON)

➔ **Goal:** Develop a personal habit of emotional awareness and release.

➔ **How To Facilitate**

- + Ask participants to write for 5–10 minutes:
What emotions do you avoid (e.g., sadness, fear, shame)?
What happens when you suppress them (sleep, irritability, distance)?
- + Offer follow-up prompts like:
Who do you feel safest expressing emotion around (friend, partner, coach), and why?
Who taught you how to feel?

➔ **Follow-Up Activity**

- + Invite anyone who wishes to share what came up—but emphasize that journaling is personal and private. Normalize not sharing aloud, and suggest a small step (e.g., schedule a check-in with a trusted person or counselor) if intense feelings surfaced; short writing may briefly increase distress before longer-term gains.

FACILITATOR GUIDE FOR NEW OR INEXPERIENCED TRAINERS

➔ Core Concepts to Know

- + **Emotional literacy:** The ability to recognize, understand, and express feelings in constructive ways.
- + **Toxic masculinity:** A cultural norm that teaches men to suppress emotion, avoid vulnerability, and equate dominance with power.
- + **Healthy masculinity:** Embracing a full range of emotions, practicing empathy, and seeking connection—not control.
- + **Equitable masculinity:** Recognizing equality as a value and desirable social norm, actively creating equitable, mutually enabling and respectful relationships.

➔ Suggested Session Flow (90-100 Minutes)

Time	Activity
00:00 - 00:10	Welcome & Grounding: “Why Talk About Emotion and Masculinity?”
00:10 - 00:30	Emotion Wheel Reflection & Sharing
00:30 - 00:50	Unpacking Masculinity Myths Group Work
00:50 - 01:10	Check-In Circle or Emotion Journaling
01:10 - 01:20	Closing Round: “One Emotion I Will Practice Naming More”

➔ Before The Session

- + Print or project the Emotion Wheel (many free versions online).
- + Prepare sample “masculinity myths” for discussion.
- + Arrange the space in a circle to foster openness and equality.
- + Set ground rules: no judgment, confidentiality, the right to pass.

➔ Insert Sidebar

- + Conformity to traditional masculinity correlates with more negative attitudes toward therapy and higher self-stigma, reducing help-seeking and engagement; a 2025 meta-analysis found strong associations between traditional masculinity and avoidance of psychological help. (NLM, 2025)
- + Emotional suppression is associated with isolation, substance misuse, and increased risk of violence; “masculine discrepancy stress” and poor emotion regulation mediate links to intimate partner violence. (NLM, 2021)

FACILITATOR GUIDE FOR NEW OR INEXPERIENCED TRAINERS

➔ Sample Script Openers

- + “Authoritarian cultures discourage emotional expression, especially for men, reinforcing that strength means control, not connection. Let’s challenge that myth.”
- + “We often say, ‘Be strong.’ What if strength includes softness, too?”
- + “No one ever got sick from crying—but many get sick from holding it in.”
- + “We’re not here to fix each other—we’re here to feel together.”

➔ Reflect On

- + **My Emotional Expression:** What emotions do I find difficult to express or witness in others? How was I socialized around emotional expression, and how might this affect my facilitation? Am I comfortable with tears, anger, or vulnerability in the room?
- + **Masculine Identity:** How do I define my own masculinity, and what aspects feel threatened when discussing emotional openness? What internalized messages about “strong men” might I need to examine?

➔ Cautions & Tips

- + This session can bring up deep emotions—normalize, don’t pathologize.
- + Don’t force anyone to share or “open up.”
- + Always provide support options (e.g., peer check-ins, counseling services) if heavy emotions arise.
- + If facilitating with a co-lead, consider gender-diverse facilitation to model inclusivity.

➔ Key Takeaways

- + Emotional expression is not weakness—it is resilience and connection.
- + Men and boys are harmed by rigid norms that disconnect them from their feelings.
- + Practicing emotional literacy supports stronger communities, better relationships, and healthier leadership.

USEFUL RESOURCES

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- 2 El Feki, S., Heilman, B. and Barker, G., Eds. (2017) Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa.: UN Women and Promundo-US. Retrieved from:
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https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2015/Prevention_Framework_unwomen_nov2015.pdf
- 5 UN Women. (2020). Work with Men and Boys for Gender Equality: A Review of Field Formations, Evidence Base and Future Directions. Retrieved from:
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