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“Boys should not cry!”

“Why do you care so much about this like a girl?”

“I am sure he's got this figured out!”

“Your wife and kids are dependent on you, and you have to pull yourself together!”

I am sure all of us have witnessed these statements by either being the ones who said it or been part of conversations when someone else said it or been on the receiving end of these statements. That's how well 'toxic masculinity' has been sewed into our societies and our day to day lives. This topic can be a little sensitive and can be interpreted in different ways based on the social conditions one's been brought up or spent their life. I am using this opportunity to talk about my interpretation of toxic masculinity based on the experiences that I have had.

As a kid I remember being bullied and called names for not having played the sport, cricket. I was born and brought up in India and cricket is worshipped there as everyone knows. I was always very bad at and to be frank I really didn't enjoy playing it. I still did try playing it because it was mostly the only sport that was being played and it was assumed that no guy could ever not like cricket. With the social set up we had in India, friends and a couple of family members looked down at me, one for not playing the sport and two for not liking it too. As a growing kid this started affecting my self-confidence with everything that I did. I started developing a fear towards any kind of sport that I played just by having the thought that I will end up not being good at it. And speaking frankly, till date I can hardly play any sport. I would say that 'toxic masculinity' was the reason for me to develop my fear towards sports which later turned into lack of interest.

Having grown up with a lot of people from different age groups around me due to an Indian joint family, I got to learn a lot from just watching at the things that were happening around me. I grew up looking up to my eldest cousin in the family because he was the eldest and was always considered to be masculine with all that he did. Fast forward 15 years, I was sitting at his place in the US sharing a drink with him. He is all married now with two kids and is the Director of IT Support for a leading bank in the US. We were just catching up on the usual things during which I just asked him, 'So how's your life going on?'. He replied very quickly without thinking twice that it was going on all well. I asked him the same question again and continued to ask him, 'How do manage everything that goes around you? Your work, running the family, taking care of your wife and kids. How do you do all of these so seamlessly?' He was just surprised by that question!

It took him a couple of minutes to process that question and replied 'I have never thought about it! Nobody has ever asked me this and I think it's the way of life.' The conversation started like this and a couple of minutes later my brother started opening up and spoke about the challenges he faced at work and how he overcame them. He also spoke about how he handled things with his family in general and passed on some good advice in the course of our conversation. He helped me learn from the mistakes that he had made during his early years. This was an eye-opening conversation for me because I always saw him as someone

who was perfect in everything he did. Only after talking to him did I get to know about the challenges and difficulties he had faced to become the person he is now. That's when I realized that my cousin was also a victim of 'toxic masculinity' and its predefined notion, amidst which he made it through successfully. When I asked him, 'What kept you going at all times?' he replied saying 'His love towards his family and his passion towards his work and were the two things that kept him going always.' At that moment I felt that masculinity should resonate with messages like these and not what we've been seeing around us.

I would like to end my note on this topic by saying that don't take anyone's feelings for granted. When someone's feeling low and you sense it, please take the effort to address it irrespective of the gender of the person facing it and that's how we end up making the world a better place to live in.