



*Karan lives in Austin, Texas with his three plants: a pothos ivy, a bamboo, and an unidentified succulent. He has struggled with ADHD and Bipolar II disorder in the past, but was lucky enough to have two loving parents that finally got his stubborn butt into therapy. He is a fan and proponent of meditation, and urges everyone reading this to establish a daily practice.*

As an Indian American man, toxic masculinity is my double inheritance.

Growing up at home I watched Bollywood romcoms, which at the turn-of-the-century regularly starred men who harassed their women counterparts and were "rewarded" with the affection of their targets.

These arcs were often framed in comedic terms or set to musical numbers, papering over some of the cognitive dissonance, and because it was never explicitly called out, these movies taught me that "eve-teasing" was synonymous with flirtation.

These patriarchal cultural norms found common cause in my public schooling, which by high school played host to the usual suspects of bullying, misogyny, and queerphobia. We were not too young to know better; we were too ignorant. We had been steeped in the culture of toxic masculinity for so long that we could not recognize the harms we were perpetuating. I would hear sentences like "I got raped by that test" or "we raped that team" and think little of it— so thoroughly is rape culture embedded in our psyches from such an early age that rape became the punchline of jokes amongst my peers.

I was on occasion the victim of bullying by the more toxic members of my cohort, and these episodes triggered feelings of worthlessness and frustration in me. I subconsciously aspired to be as powerful as my bullies, and I buried my emotions under a tough exterior so as not to appear weak. These feelings eventually metastasized, resurfaced as anger, and were projected outward— in the most shameful period of my youth, I redirected this anger at my younger brother, bullying him in a misguided attempt to reclaim the power my bullies had taken from me.

The growing horror at the recognition of that behavior eventually led me to emotionally shut down altogether whenever deep feelings surfaced. So thoroughly was my thinking corrupted by the mindset of toxic masculinity that I continued in that vein for years, further suppressing any strong feelings (and crippling my emotional intelligence) so as to become the "man" I aspired to be. I was no longer your stereotypical example, but even outwardly asymptomatic men like me were often unwitting carriers of the cultural virus.

To compensate for the lack of introspection and positive processing amongst male friends, I overburdened my female friends and relationship partners with my emotional baggage. I still see the same pattern play out in other relationships, and even amongst some uncles and aunts: so many men who are unable to process their feelings in a healthy manner and dump the emotional work (or fallout) onto others. We Indian Americans as a whole are still deeply entrapped by this cultural inertia, but... there are glimmers of hope on the horizon.

We are slowly but surely evolving past toxic masculinity. Bollywood is more of a mixed bag as of late: there are at least a handful of movies that embraced this deeper, healthier, more empathic masculinity which have met with commercial success. My family, friends, and mentors have been on their own journeys as well, and have helped reveal and reflect this healthier masculinity to me. I have come to realize that it is in fact our birthright as men, buried under layers of conditioning, but already within us and just waiting to be reclaimed.

To my peers: we have to do better. We have to call out the toxic behavior amongst our friends. Being young, dumb, or drunk are not excuses. And once we take on the task of dismantling this in our culture, we have to take the work upon ourselves as well: we need to excise the toxic patterns from our own behaviors and heal the psychic wounds. We have to do better for ourselves, because our younger friends, brothers and sisters, cousins, and children are looking up to us to see what a real man looks like.