

We need to redefine manhood. Our warped ideas are causing a mental health crisis

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5 One sunny afternoon, when I was around 13 or 14, I was walking down Tottenham High Road hand-in-hand with one of my uncles. He wasn't a blood relative but, like many of the older men in my community, I called him uncle. I was born in Kinshasa in the Congo, a society in which men hold hands to show the affection and bond we feel for each other. As we walked on to his housing estate, a group of teenagers spotted us. I could see the looks of disgust on their faces. I heard one of them call out: "Yo, big man. You holding hands, yeah." I looked over. His eyes punched through my chest. I felt my legs shake as if my knees were going to buckle. I can still remember the sting in my heart. The experience made me question what "normal" was, and highlighted contradictions in my own sense of masculinity.

15 I had a good childhood. I had a close family and felt love. But as I got older, I struggled with my mental health. From around 18 until my mid-20s, I experienced depression, anxiety and social isolation. When making a phone call, I'd have to rehearse the conversation before I could pick up and dial. There would be times when, if I didn't want attention, I'd just avoid a situation altogether. At university, if I was late to a lecture, I just wouldn't go in – pushing those doors open and letting people see me was the worst feeling in the world.

20 I eventually realised that my issues with masculinity, and not having an outlet for some of these emotions, were part of the problem. My emotions would sometimes turn into pent-up aggression that manifested itself as violence: I'd get into fights; I'd escalate situations rather than calming them down. Violence became normal.

25 For a long time I felt completely alone. There were no men I could speak to openly about this. I felt more comfortable speaking to strangers, people who I knew I would not cross paths with again, than I did with those closest to me. And so I buried these feelings deep within.

As I got older, however, I found the confidence to share my feelings and found out that many other men were going through the same thing.

30 Throughout our society, men are affected by toxic hyper-masculinity, and it is contributing to a crisis in men's health – both physical and mental. Men commit the overwhelming majority of violent crimes, are disproportionately the victims of violent crimes, and are more than three times more likely to die by suicide than women.

35 We live in a rigid culture in which men are not comfortable expressing themselves. We're socialised to be stoic and strong, to not consider our own feelings or state of wellbeing, and we're not taught self-care. This can lead to a whole range of issues, from substance abuse and addiction, to mental health problems.

Any expression of masculinity that imposes on or dominates another person is toxic. If you look at how boys are expected to become men, there's a lot of aggression and violence. Boys are taught to play rough, and that they can get away with breaking the rules. That's normalised as "boys will be boys".

40 My experiences led me to seek work helping others, and eventually to becoming a mental health social worker. I'm training using a model that focuses on supporting people not just as individuals, but also through their families and their communities. This is so important, because while working I've noticed how many older men, particularly those over 45, are socially isolated. Many are cut off from their

45 families; they don't have a network or a support group, and they are struggling with severe mental health issues.

Speaking to these men has been eye-opening. There's a certain type of regret that seems to come up, tied to the way they have expressed their masculinity in the past. If a man was promiscuous in his youth, for example, he may have been encouraged in it. But there are so many men I talk to who look back and think, "I wish I had somebody with me now."

50 It's become clear to me that we need social change to break the cycle. Boys need role models who can be held up as paragons of positive masculinity. That's why I wrote my latest book. Its title, *Mask Off*, is a track by the US rapper Future – and his personal life combines positive and toxic masculinity.

55 'The US rapper Future's hyper-masculine persona is praised, and his infidelity and promiscuity are widely celebrated.' Future's fiancée Ciara left him and married NFL player Russell Wilson, who is now stepfather to Future and Ciara's son. Wilson is a star athlete, but when expressing his love for his stepson on social media he's been accused of being "soft" or "weak". Meanwhile, Future's hyper-masculine persona is praised, and his infidelity and promiscuity are widely celebrated.

60 Our society can reinforce the worst kinds of masculinity. We need more Russell Wilsons – but we also need change in the education system, in music and sport, and all other aspects of society. We need to redefine what manhood means. Our ultimate goal must be to show every man and boy that it's possible to care, to have a good heart, to go beyond people's expectations, to share your emotions and be vulnerable.

• JJ Bola is a writer and poet. His latest book is *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*. He is training as a mental health social worker through the Think Ahead programme