

The shame of the 'red pill'

Jeanine Connor calls for a more compassionate consideration of why some teenage boys fall down toxic digital rabbit holes

Last year, the Netflix drama taking public discourse by storm was *Adolescence*. I had my reservations at just how many people were taking its message at face value, when it was a work of fiction.¹ It portrayed teenage boys as misogynistic predators, which many viewers – including parents, professionals and the Prime Minister – seemed to take as fact. The show pointed the finger of blame firmly at the 'manosphere'. Netflix has released another 'hot topic' show in the form of the Louis Theroux documentary *Inside the Manosphere*, which has once again brought young men's use of digital media to the fore.

As a psychotherapist working mostly with adolescents and young adults, and the Editor of *BACP Children, Young People and Families* journal, I'm keen to encourage wider dialogue around the manosphere and in particular the role of shame.

Roots of shame

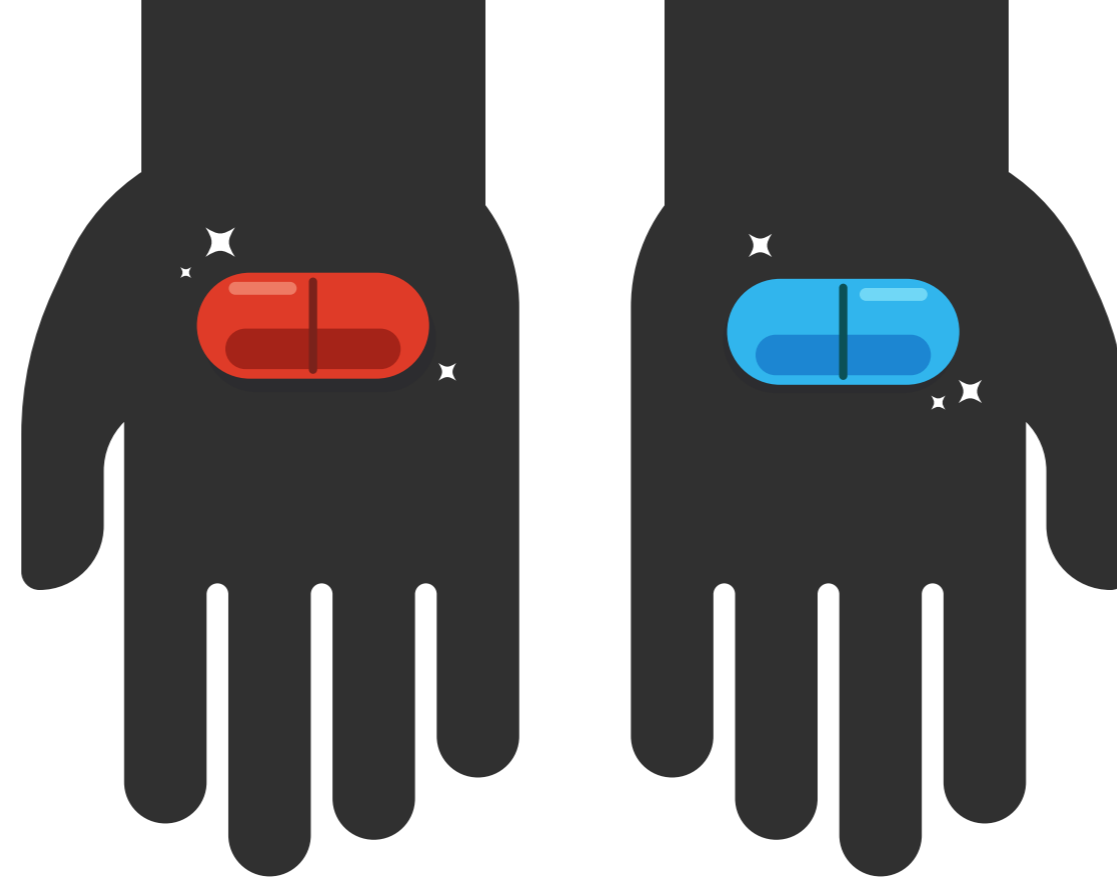
As therapists we understand that shame is a core human emotion that causes us to feel bad about ourselves and to imagine that other people feel bad about us too. This feeling makes us want to withdraw and socially isolate, or lash out and attack, which perpetuates the feeling of 'badness' and develops into low self-esteem, high self-hatred and a persistent feeling of unworthiness.

While shame might be something we become agonisingly aware of during adolescence, it develops much earlier during infancy as an ordinary part of social and emotional development. Shame evolves in response to boundaries as infants learn what is and isn't deemed to be acceptable through experiences of being told 'no'. Good enough parenting

inevitably involves countless experiences of rupture and repair.² Something happens that feels uncomfortable to the child (the rupture), and the parent offers comfort (the repair). For example, an infant does something that their parent deems improper; maybe they break something, wet the bed or make a mess. Their parent tells them, 'No, this isn't OK', evoking uncomfortable feelings in the child about the wrongdoing. If the good enough parent offers comfort and reassurance, such as telling their child 'accidents happen', and manages the mess, breakage or leakage without much fuss or judgment, the infant might feel bad about what happened and learn not to do it again. A misattuned parent, on the other hand, might over or underreact, letting their own feelings, perhaps disgust or despair, spill out, creating a rupture in the parent/child dyad, which acts as a mirror for the child's sense of self, in effect telling them: 'You're disgusting and bad.' The child conflates the 'bad' behaviour with their 'bad' self, and their 'bad' feelings go unregulated by the parent because they are dysregulated too.

A good enough childhood involves countless experiences of these ruptures and repairs wrapped up in attunement, nurture and love. This enables children to separate *doing* something bad, disgusting or disappointing from *being* bad, disgusting or disappointing. We also know that guilt and shame are ordinary emotions that develop through ordinary processes of socialisation and maturation.

'Boys need spaces where they can acknowledge all aspects of their identity and explore them and feel validated. For most these spaces are provided in loving homes'



The difference is that guilt involves feeling bad about *doing* something wrong and is context specific, while shame involves feeling bad about *being* wrong, defective or damaged³ and is experienced as intrinsic to the self. If children grow up in environments where they are deprived of parental attunement, nurture and love, they internalise the wrong, bad, disappointing feelings that become the seeds of pervasive shame.

Good enough

The most striking difference I observe in the presentation of adolescent boys is between those who have grown up with good enough care and those who have not. We are better educated about the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect and family dysfunction. We know that these experiences lead to long-term challenges affecting health, behaviour and educational attainment. What is less

widely acknowledged is how they affect a young person's sense of self as good enough or not good enough, and how the latter evolves into an internalised sense that they are fundamentally flawed and burdened with shame.

Abraham Maslow knew this 80 years ago, as set out in his hierarchy of needs, which places human needs in order of priority.⁴ As we know physiological needs such as food, water and shelter must be satisfied before we can attend to needs of safety, then love, belonging and connection. If these are not met we cannot move to the higher levels of self-esteem and self-actualisation. In other words, children who are neglected or feel unsafe will not develop a sense of self-worth and will struggle to meet their potential.

Primarily our needs are met, or not, within a family setting. If a child's needs are unmet through neglect, or their safety is threatened through trauma or abuse, or they experience critical or misattuned parenting, they may struggle to fulfil their potential. If, when children mature and start to socialise outside the home, they experience exclusion from peers, which could include racism, ableist, trans or homophobic bullying, their need to connect, belong and be loved remains

unmet, and their sense of themselves as inadequate and unworthy is fixed.

In care

Children in care often have a deep sense of themselves as defective or damaged, which comes from their experiences of deprivation, neglect or abuse. These feelings are expressed in the presentations that precipitate referrals to therapy. I'm hesitant to generalise, but girls are typically more likely to internalise emotions, including shame, while boys are more likely to externalise, hide their true self and develop survival roles like 'tough guy', 'clever boy' or 'clown' in attempts to get their connection and belonging needs met.

So while in girls shame might show up as compliance, anxiety or self-injury, in boys it's more likely to manifest as acting out, anger and aggression. It's easy to see, therefore, why teenage girls are more likely to be referred for talking therapy while teenage boys are more often pathologised, criminalised or sent for 'anger management'. It's easier to respond to observable behaviour because it's easier to see.

It has been claimed that shame is 'directly behind the vast majority of violence and aggression' in this demographic.⁵ Whenever these boys show up in my therapy room I'm told that punishments such as exclusions, denying nice things or fun activities, or other teenage versions of the 'naughty step' don't work and they just hate being told 'no'. Of course they do. Taking things away or isolating them reignites again and again the shame of feeling flawed.

Let down

Collective failure to think about the emotions underlying teenage boys' observable behaviour is one of the ways they are being let down by the systems around them, and it's being proliferated by mainstream media.

This type of discourse is detrimental to boys because it's blaming and shaming, and for those who really are floundering it can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving them thinking, 'If that's what everyone expects of me, that's what I'll become.'

Infantile experiences get replayed, psychologically and sometimes literally, during adolescence in the context of powerful hormonal fluctuations, social and academic pressure, constant surveillance and endless judgment. If childhood was good enough, adolescence is tough. If childhood was not experienced as good enough, adolescence is excruciating and shines a floodlight on shame. Adolescence is when boys really want to fit in, so anything that makes them feel different, or be perceived as different – such as ethnicity, sexuality, family background, financial status – can be a source of shame.

Boys need spaces where they can acknowledge all aspects of their identity and explore them and feel validated. For most these spaces are provided in loving homes. For others they are found in the therapy room. Some might turn to dark corners of 'the web'. For those boys whose needs have not been met, who feel unworthy and who already carry the burden of shame, the offer of connection and belonging they find there is too tantalising to resist. They stick around, get sucked in; it meets their needs.

Being a man

Many of the male influencers who occupy the manosphere call themselves coaches. They offer a service, often by paid subscription, that provides a roadmap for boys who are lost, wandering aimlessly without a reliable male role model, wondering, 'How can I be a man?' The influencers offer a 'fix' by way of the so-called 'red pill', which isn't a pill at all; it's a lifestyle promoting an extreme version of masculinity known as 'alpha' – heterosexual, cisgender, physically strong, emotionally detached and in control – that is superior to women and beta males. They also offer a sense of belonging through online communities that fill internal vacuums and real-world voids. Influencers yield such power by weaponising boys' shame and feelings of inadequacy. You're ashamed of having no friends? Take the red pill! You're ashamed of your low 'body count'? Take the red pill! You're ashamed of your puny body? Take the red pill! You're ashamed of failing

academically? Take the red pill! I've deliberately chosen not to name any of the male influencers populating these digital spaces because I don't want to feed the algorithm, but I've done my homework. Taking the red pill means consuming a high-protein, low-fat diet. It involves extreme physical daily workouts with a focus on building muscle bulk. It means making millions of pounds by mimicking the influencer model of paid subscription 'coaching'. It means forsaking a monogynous relationship – alphas are too magnificent to commit to just one woman and deny all others a piece of the pie – but they *should* demand that the women they sleep with are exclusively faithful to them. Or if young men *really* want to prove champion levels of control, it means embarking on a semen retention programme, avoiding ejaculation by abstaining from sexual intercourse and masturbation for anything from seven to 100 days – the longer you last, the better man you are. Proponents claim that this practice improves physical, mental and spiritual vitality. Research suggests there is no scientific backing whatsoever for the benefits espoused.

Teenage boys take the red pill as an antidote to shame, but it only serves to feed the monster. It's the shame of not feeling good enough that draws them in, and shame that keeps them there. Some influencers use shame as a stick to 'encourage' boys to stay on track too, instructing them to share (often unrealistic) goals with the online community and then share their failure to achieve them on a, yes, you guessed it, 'wall of shame'. The boys are back where they started, with an added experience of devaluation and an extra dollop of shame.

The answer?

Over recent years many newspaper stories and bestselling books have explored 'generation anxiety', pointing the finger of blame at smartphones, which I've repeatedly taken issue with.⁶

You might be wondering why, given my research into toxic digital spaces, I'm

sticking with my assertion that pointing the finger of blame in that direction is not the answer. I think that newspaper headlines, dramas and documentaries, bestselling books and discourse around prohibiting social media for under-16s have all prompted important conversations. But I also believe that they have added fuel to the raging fires of misunderstanding, much like the things they are trying to ban. Shame grows in dark corners, like attracts like, and we are innately programmed to seek what we need. That is why *some* boys, whose needs have not been met within a loving home, who don't feel good enough and who already carry a deep sense of shame, turn to online communities such as those found in the manosphere in search of what they're missing.

If you're wondering whether or not I'm pointing the finger of blame at parents, I fully acknowledge that theories and research about parenting can provoke guilt, anxiety, hostility and shame.^{7,8} Parents of boys who are angry, violent, aggressive, refuse to attend school, disappear down toxic digital rabbit holes or are looked after by the care system often carry a sense of guilt (for the choices they made), hostility (towards professionals) and anxiety (about the future) all wrapped up in a blanket of shame about not being good enough themselves. They need our support too: to help them to help their boys.

It's our job as professionals, parents and responsible adults to offer teenage boys an alternative to the 'red pill'. And to do this not by taking something else away from them but by providing spaces where they feel seen, heard and loved. Therapy should never be used as a metaphorical stick to punish boys for 'bad' behaviour, or as a bribe to avoid another unwanted outcome. Adolescent boys want to feel they have agency and control, which is what the 'red pill' promises to provide.

First and foremost, accessing support needs to be an informed choice by helping boys to understand what it might look like, when it will happen, who with, how long for and what will happen if they accept it. They need to properly understand confidentiality, and this must be clearly explained, maintained and respected. From my professional experience teenage

boys don't want to enter a therapy space that looks like it's designed for girls or younger children, as many are, because that tells them again, 'You don't belong here' and reinforces their shame about being unworthy.

Although I'm generalising for the sake of brevity, it's important to remember too that in the real world every teenage boy is unique and each is the expert in his own experience. As therapists we must caution against jumping to conclusions proliferated by media discourse. We must stop colluding with the mainstream idea of quick fixes via unsustainable bans. We must stop tarring all teenage boys with the same misogynistic brush. If we don't stop, shame on us. ●

The idea for this article came from an interview Jeanine gave to another author who was researching male shame.

© Jeanine Connor

REFERENCES

1. Connor J. What was the point of Netflix's Adolescence? *Therapy Today* 2025; 36(7): 70-72.
2. Winnicott DW. The maturational processes and the facilitating environment. London: Routledge; 1990.
3. Shah D. The analyst's torment: unbearable mental states in countertransference. London; Phoenix; 2022.
4. Maslow AH. A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 1943; 50(4): 370-396.
5. Kingswood C. The biology of trauma. In: Donovan S, Kingswood C. The unofficial guide to therapeutic parenting for childhood aggression and violence. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2023 (pp48-65).
6. Connor J. The truth about 'Generation Anxiety'. *Therapy Today* 2024; 35(6): 18-22.
7. Gerhardt S. Why love matters. London: Routledge; 2004.
8. Connor J. 'You're not my f*cking mother' and other things Gen Z say in therapy. Monmouth: PCCS Books; 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeanine Connor MBACP is a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor in private practice and author of 'You're Not My F*cking Mother' and other things Gen Z say in therapy and 'Stop F*cking Nodding' and other things 16-year-olds say in therapy. She is the Editor of *BACP Children, Young People and Families* journal. jeanineconnor.com

