

Getting Healthy Touch at a Journey Into Manhood Weekend

Written by David in Florida

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I just returned from my first Journey into Manhood (JiM) weekend staffing experience, which means I assisted the leaders of the weekend. The experience has touched me so deeply, and in so many unexpected ways, that I have still not finished absorbing and processing all of it fully. But I have experienced one big takeaway already, a breakthrough on an issue I have been working on for many years. I would like to share it with you.

My biggest fear going into the weekend was that, as Soundman, I would get stuck running equipment and not get enough connection with other men. So before the journeyers arrived Friday, encouraged by my therapist and a fellow staff member, I asked the staff for connection - hugs, holding, conversation, any kind of connection in any free moments any of them had-throughout the weekend. I ended up getting more than I could have ever imagined. I think I was hugged and held and embraced by more men during that weekend than at any time in the year and a half since my own JiM weekend. I was so filled with gratitude, love and tears for so much of the weekend, I almost couldn't believe it. It felt so good.

But as it was all happening, I was also aware of another feeling inside me: discomfort and even shame about accepting and enjoying all of this. As the processes of the weekend unfolded, I began to get more in touch with this shame and see how it was intertwined with my past experiences. I was openly gay for five years in my early 20s, until I walked away from that life and shut everything down. So for me, holding and touching another guy has always been associated with sex and "being gay."

Intellectually, my own JiM weekend helped me see that it is possible and normal and in fact really important to accept healthy touch from another man as a way to heal the boy inside who never got that need met. But in truth I never really let myself accept this. Since leaving the lifestyle, I have always been afraid that the touching would lead to sex - or even if it didn't, wanting and enjoying being held and touched by a man would mean I was backsliding rather than healing. For me, until JiM, touching another man in a kind, affectionate, caring way never came without strings or expectations or conditions attached. The idea that male-to-male touch can happen in a healthy and healing and unconditional way has been much harder for me to accept than I realized.

There is another layer to this. I have come to see how profoundly this shame and confusion over my need for close physical and emotional connection to other men has affected my marriage. I now see that as this need became more pronounced in recent years, I have withdrawn more and

more from my wife. The story I told myself is that she couldn't handle hearing about this need. Even though she knew about my same-sex attraction (SSA) before we got married, I still felt like I needed to protect her from that part of myself or something. I didn't trust her to accept that I need this - and that my needing it doesn't mean I am still gay. Even though she has already said she accepted me, that wasn't enough - I think I didn't really believe her. Or maybe it was that I never really believed or accepted or forgave myself. Part of me knew that even though I left the lifestyle, I still wanted physical touch from other men, I still craved it. But since I didn't fully understand why and didn't know what to do about it I just walled it off. I decided to pretend it was not there. I buried it under a covering of more and more shame. And I shut down more and more in marriage.

Well, bottom line, the bubble finally burst last weekend. I was so overwhelmed by men giving me what I have wanted for so long - true physical and emotional and spiritual connection - that the walls finally came down. I spent significant parts of the weekend in tears. By Sunday, the flood of emotion was so great that when I took a break from doing sound during one of the morning processes I actually broke down crying in the bathroom. Returning home, as I was finally able to talk through this with my therapist, I finally saw clearly what I have just described. It's okay to want to be held. It's okay to want closeness and acceptance and approval from other men - and it's okay to ask for it. It's doesn't mean I am gay, it doesn't mean I want sex, it doesn't mean I am backsliding, it doesn't mean I am cheating on my wife. It means I am healing. I have heard this in my head so many times before. But now I starting to believe and understand it in my gut and in my heart.

A half hour after I got off the phone with my counselor, my wife called, and some more walls came down. I told her all of this, all about the shame, all about the censoring I have been doing about my feelings relating to my SSA, and my need for connection with other men. We discussed my father, we discussed my past, we discussed my need for healthy holding. I cried and she comforted me (it was over the phone, but it was comfort nevertheless). For years the story I told myself is that if I shared these things with her, my wife would shun and reject me. Instead, she embraced me. In my judgment she heard me in a way she hasn't in a long time, probably because I finally allowed myself to become vulnerable and just open up to her. And for the first time in many, many years, she sounded like the woman I married - the soft, understanding, caring and compassionate one. Where has she been? That's easy - she has been waiting for me to return.

So right now I feel an immense amount of relief. I experience it as thoughts like "Anything is possible now," and sensations in my body like this wonderful lightness in my chest. I see two stretches for me in the coming weeks. First, finding or creating a safe place where I can get healthy holding with other men in my area on a regular basis. I have tried half-heartedly over the past few months to make this happen. I see now that I really need to succeed. I am confident that

having my wife on board - and no longer feeling guilty and tiptoeing around either her or the issue - will help. And the second stretch is to banish, one day a time, the censor in my head - and resolve from this moment forward to speak my truth to my wife, regardless of what my shadow may be telling me may or may not happen. Telling all of you about all of this is part of how I am trying to anchor this understanding and make it more real.

I have so much gratitude for everything relating to this work, this community of men, their dedication and authenticity and open-heartedness that words cannot begin to express what I feel.