PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND DISTRESS AMONG YOUNG MEN EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

FORUM SUMMARY

Contextual setting

On April 30, 2026, a knowledge-sharing forum was held on the prevention of distress and violence among young men who experience rejection or exclusion in their intimate relationships. More than 20 people from the research and intervention communities gathered to share their knowledge and gain a better understanding of this complex reality. During the forum, four panelists presented findings related to the relationship difficulties that men may experience. This was followed by discussions aimed at defining and understanding the various challenges faced by these men, as well as proposing courses of action in the areas of education, intervention, and research. In this report, you will find a summary of the presentations, the main findings regarding the situation, and some potential solutions suggested during the discussions.

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Presentation Summaries

Sliding into—and Out of—the Incelosphere: An Overview, Research Summary, and Recommendations for Intervention

Panelist : **Prof. Marie-Aude Boislard**, Department of Sexology, Université du Québec à Montréal, and holder of the Canada Research Chair in Developmental Sexology

First, Professor Marie-Aude Boislard presented the research objectives of the incels project[1-3]. 1. To assess the current state of scientific research on incels, particularly studies that adopt a developmental approach. 2. To gain a better understanding of the pathways into and out of the incelosphere. 3. To be better equipped as agents of change to support exit from the "incelosphere," deradicalization, and the transition from "online" to "offline." In this review, she and her team identified three ways in which incels perceive themselves: 1. as victims (of a society based on appearance, as failures, isolated, physically unattractive, and excluded); 2. as having mental health issues (suicidal tendencies); and 3. as lacking social skills and self-confidence. She noted that incels seem to position themselves in a polarizing and distancing manner, viewing themselves as pitted against the rest of the world. Furthermore, they reportedly feel that everyone except them has access to romantic and sexual relationships—particularly women.

The professor went on to describe the characteristics of the incel ecosystem. This environment is said to foster radicalization through confirmation bias, the creation of a subculture with its own lexicon, and echo chambers based on the group's beliefs and opinions, which are constantly reinforced. These platforms focus on the "lack of access" to sexuality, appearance, and expressions of masculinity. These forums persist despite their instability thanks to the involvement of certain members who have a strong sense of belonging. Furthermore, these environments reportedly feature violent discourse directed at themselves and others, characterized by hostility, frustration, misogyny, and the dehumanization of women.

Prof. Boislard explained that the forums were originally intended to address the need for a sense of belonging and social support. In fact, people who use these platforms are primarily seeking informational support (advice/suggestions, guidance, assessment of their situation, and referrals). Subsequently, they find emotional

support (understanding/empathy, encouragement, sympathy, and a listening ear) as well as support for their self-esteem (relief from blame, compliments, and validation).

As for leaving the incelosphere, there are several reasons why someone might do so. In another study conducted with a female student, Professor Boislard identified three fundamental milestones: 1. Forming romantic relationships; 2. Attempting to change one's ideology; and 3. Identifying the difficulties involved in changing one's ideology. This process requires conscious effort as well as psychological and behavioral change.

In conclusion, the professor presented three key areas for working with incels. First, it is essential to understand the incels' life trajectories. This involves addressing their negative experiences, identifying their motivations, adapting to where they are in their deradicalization journey, and highlighting the societal pressures contributing to their distress. Second, interventions with these men must be tailored to their specific needs. It is essential to recognize the distinct psychological and emotional dimensions unique to them and to develop interventions that are adapted to their needs and sensitivities. Third, their personal and social resources must be strengthened. This is achieved by providing a safe space for them to be heard, supporting their efforts to develop an "offline" network that can offer social support, and ultimately fostering the development of their social skills.

Men, Breakups, and Distress: Understanding to Better Prevent

Panelist : **Prof. Audrey Brassard**, department of Psychology, University of Sherbrooke

Professor Audrey Brassard presented the results of her research[4,5] on romantic breakups and the distress experienced by men during this period, with the aim of better understanding this phenomenon and contributing to its prevention.

The study presented aimed to better understand the impact of a romantic breakup on men who are in the early stages of seeking help in Quebec. First, the study sought to describe how the characteristics of a romantic breakup are linked to psychological distress, emotional dysregulation, and suicidal behaviors in men experiencing a separation. Second, the study aimed to understand the links between the experience of a romantic breakup and the perpetration of intimate partner violence (against an ex-partner).

The research findings suggest that romantic breakups among men are associated with an increased risk of psychological distress, particularly symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, they are linked to emotional dysregulation only when the man did not initiate the breakup. Furthermore, a recent breakup—particularly when it was not initiated by the man—appears to increase the risk of suicidal thoughts, while being single and feeling lonely are associated with an increased risk of suicide attempts. Furthermore, death threats and physical violence toward the ex-partner are more common when the breakup is recent, which could be explained by a desire to regain power.

Based on these findings, several potential solutions were proposed. First, men would benefit from a social support network and education on the breakup process to help them better cope with the loss and regain hope. Second, to prevent suicide attempts associated with feelings of isolation, low self-worth, or despair, professionals could provide perspective, offer tools, and foster self-esteem and self-efficacy. Professor Brassard concluded by emphasizing the need for prevention, intervention, and early detection to break the cycle of violence.

Survey on Services Offered to Men Experiencing Difficulties in Intimate Relationships

Panelist : **David Guilmette**, Ph.D. candidate, School of Social Work and Criminology, Laval University

In this presentation, David Guilmette unveiled the preliminary results of a survey conducted among various community organizations that provide psychosocial services to men. The survey aimed to provide an overview of services for men experiencing difficulties in their intimate relationships, to better understand the intervention practices currently in use, to identify areas for improvement, and to contribute to the development of services better suited to this client population.

The results show that men experiencing relationship difficulties often face complex and multidimensional challenges, including psychological distress, isolation, relationship difficulties, and significant emotional reactions. Although many organizations are implementing promising practices, several needs remain inadequately addressed, including access to specialized services, support for victims, opportunities for socialization, and certain practical needs related to living conditions and housing.

The survey also highlighted several challenges faced by practitioners and organizations. These include a lack of services specifically tailored to men's needs, insufficient training and expertise on these issues, institutional and social constraints, and the difficulty of reaching certain client groups who are more vulnerable or less likely to seek help. Insufficient funding was also identified as a major obstacle to the development and consolidation of services.

Finally, the results point to several areas for improvement. These include the development of specialized services tailored to men's needs, the strengthening of group interventions and social support, the implementation of measures to prevent and reduce stigma, and a better adaptation of services to men's realities. The results also highlight the need to better structure practices, advance scientific and clinical knowledge, and strengthen intervention tools and models. More broadly, this study underscores the importance of better recognizing and addressing men's needs in order to prevent psychological distress, relationship difficulties, and violence.

Breakups Among Men Aged 18 to 35

Panelist : **Prof. Philippe Roy**, School of Social Work, University of Sherbrooke

Professor Philippe Roy presented the preliminary results of a research project on young men's experiences with romantic breakups. As part of this study, the researchers used the "PhotoVoice" method, an approach that combines photography and interviews.

Twenty young men aged 18 to 35 were invited to take photos illustrating their experiences with romantic breakups and then discuss them during individual interviews. These discussions aimed to deepen the understanding of their experiences and their process of coping with the breakup.

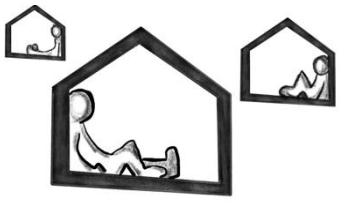
The research findings highlight the diversity of experiences related to romantic breakups and the adjustment process. For some, the breakup was marked by loneliness and, at times, suicidal thoughts. For others, it led to positive changes, allowing them to grow and learn. The interviews also highlighted the individual strategies young men used to cope with difficulties, such as reading, playing sports, writing, or traveling. They also underscored the importance of social support from friends, family, pets, or even professional help during the most difficult times. Some participants also expressed their discomfort with the sometimes negative portrayal of men in the media and on social media. Furthermore, some pointed out the dangers associated with content that appears to be empowering, reassuring, and beneficial for men, but which ultimately proves toxic to them and those around them.

Professor Roy concluded by suggesting avenues for discussion related to compassionate masculinity. This involves the need to counter discourses of domination over women in intimate relationships, particularly by questioning traditional male socialization and fostering secure attachment. These efforts could be supported through education, awareness-raising, and social support from peers and helping professionals.

Summary of the Discussion

Following the presentations, we held workshops inspired by the World Café method. The workshops allowed participants to share and deepen their reflections on the realities experienced by young men facing rejection, isolation, or relationship distress. In this report, we have included relevant references for further reading on the various topics discussed. The discussions highlighted the need for safe spaces to acknowledge lived experiences and for brave spaces to challenge toxic beliefs with compassion.[6] It is essential that these spaces do not become "boys' clubs" where young men share and normalize disparaging language toward women and people of diverse gender identities. This represents a balance between emotional support and accountability. Participants also identified concrete courses of action in the areas of education, intervention, and prevention, aligned with more inclusive and coordinated responses.

Identify needs and challenges



In terms of seeking help, a trend observed in both intervention and research is the tendency of more traditional men to downplay their distress and to delay or avoid asking for help[7]. When they do ask for help, it is often during a crisis. Indeed, many young men isolate themselves when going through a breakup and suffer as a result of this isolation. This logically points to the need for proactive interventions, prior to a request for help.[8] It is also suggested that safe spaces be provided where they can be vulnerable.[9] Furthermore, it has been emphasized that inclusive approaches that take into account intersectionality (rather than homogeneous groups), culture, and diversity would be beneficial[10,11].

In terms of social support, forum participants identified several needs among young men experiencing relationship difficulties and those around them. Some mentioned community empowerment, which enables the development of interventions in collaboration with those affected. Practitioners often observe that young men struggle to understand consent and respect for interpersonal boundaries. It is important to strengthen emotional literacy, which promotes self-reflection and relationship skills both online and offline[12].

More broadly, participants emphasize the crucial need for diverse portrayals of male role models who navigate relationship challenges (breakups and involuntary singledom) in a positive way. These examples could serve as a catalyst for raising awareness about the impact of traditional masculine norms on young men and those

around them, as well as for promoting caring masculinities[13,14]. This concept is based on the rejection of male domination over women and people of diverse gender identities, as well as on practices of self-care, care for others, and care for the community. These approaches aim to support the development of a healthy and open gender identity among young men.

Identify obstacles and limitations

The group effect is identified as a significant limitation when peers normalize or encourage toxic behaviors in the context of relationship difficulties [15] (for example, emotional repression, devaluation of one's own femininity, violence against women, people of diverse gender identities, and other men, etc.). On the contrary, this effect can also serve as a positive catalyst in group interventions that foster a welcoming environment and mutual support for young men experiencing similar situations [16].

In terms of interventions, although prevention is key when it comes to relationship difficulties, funding for such initiatives is often one-time, which limits their long-term impact[8]. Service providers are observing an increase in complex situations. They express the need to strengthen the service pathway and to better equip themselves to adequately support the young men involved.[17].

Identify topics for research and assessment

To ensure the rigor and relevance of interventions, participants emphasized the importance of evaluating them. In addition, support and training in the development of communities of practice would be essential. On the research front, many are interested in group effects among young men, as well as the impacts of interventions on men's gender identity and behaviors.

Conclusion

The event brought together a variety of perspectives through four presentations focusing on the reality of incels, young men's experiences with breakups, and the services offered by organizations. Discussions among participants clearly identified the needs and challenges faced by men. They also provided an opportunity to reflect on ways to address these issues, taking into account the specific realities presented. The discussions highlighted several barriers to intervention, which helped clarify the current issues facing the community. Finally, participants identified research topics to be explored, underscoring the need to continue this collective effort. This event thus represents an important step toward deepening our understanding of men's needs and guiding future actions.

Acknowledgments

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