

## **‘I feel worthless’: Are men’s community groups the antidote to the loneliness epidemic?**

“It's kind of an anti-manosphere group, really,” Tom Stroud said when asked how he would describe his community.

He is talking about Shoulder to Shoulder, a London based men’s community that he and his friend, Dan Shrigley, founded in February last year, when Dan reached out to Tom after seeing one of his videos. When they met up, they bonded over how hard it is to make friends as adults and wondered if other men feel the same. The community was born.

What started as a handful of people meeting for a walk and a coffee every two weeks, has now grown into 20 to 30 events a month. From book and curry clubs to sauna, cold plunge sessions and yoga - here men get together in different forms, all with the goal to connect.

It didn't take long for the founders to notice a pattern among the men who were turning up.

“These are people that have everything on paper but still feel like it's a huge hole in their life,” Dan said. “They might have a great job, stable income, a nice house, family, kids - all those things. And they'll still turn to me and say, ‘I feel worthless.’”

Tom agreed: “Most of our members are guys that have good jobs and loving partners. It’s really interesting to see that most of them come from the finance and tech industry. But for some reason, the opportunities to connect with other men just aren't presenting themselves to these guys.”

As they got older, these men have become increasingly isolated, Dan said.

“I was reading an article that my dad sent me. It's a kind of becoming a well-known phenomenon that men particularly don't have many close friends, and it gets worse as they get older.”

### **Not just one men’s community**

Shoulder to Shoulder isn’t unique. More and more men’s communities have been emerging in recent years. These informal spaces are appearing across all age groups and do not identify as mental health support. Instead, they help men connect with other men, make friends and create relaxed environments where they have the option to open up but don’t have to.

Sanites Saintus, founder of the community Friends Now, said: “I decided to create Friends Now, originally for myself to get new friends. Then I realised that there were many people in the same circumstance, especially people who live outside London, outside the city.”

He started the online group a year ago and the demand has been rising since then.

“I have people now calling me all the way from South Africa,” he said.

“A lot of people come and say I just need friends - I don't have friends outside of my wife or my family. So, originally, that was their goal. But then they start talking about their childhood, how they grew up, the experiences, the problems, the difficulty they had in their lives.”

## **Why are these communities growing so quickly?**

The rise of these communities comes at a time of growing concern about men's mental health.

Suicide in England and Wales is around three times higher among men than women, according to the Office for National Statistics, and the gap between the sexes has been increasing over time.

However, a June 2025 survey by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) found almost half of men still feel a stigma around therapy.

For Tom, the space is the issue. Even after accepting that you need help, going to see a therapist is a completely different story, he explained.

“That environment can be incredibly intimidating and isolating for a guy” he said. “Because it's face to face and normally with a female therapist because the majority of therapists are female.”

Shoulder to Shoulder takes its name from the belief that men often find it easier to open up shoulder to shoulder rather than face to face.

Dan said: “Men find face-to-face conversation quite confrontational. So, if you sit a guy down and say, ‘how are you feeling?’ in a coffee shop, it's just not going to work. He's going to be like, ‘yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine’. But if you're walking side-by-side or whatever it might be that's in a very low-key environment.”

The founders are sure that the low-pressure environment naturally makes men open up, almost without realising that they are.

“It's not labelled as a mental health space, but indirectly we've had huge impacts on people's mental health because we've created these environments where that more intimate connection can happen, which is what men want but really struggle to execute on,” Dan added.

Researchers say these informal settings may be particularly effective for young men.

Dr Peter Harris, Associate Professor in Criminology at Oxford Brookes, said you cannot simply bring young men displaying harmful behaviours or attitudes into traditional mental health settings if they do not see themselves as having mental health issues.

He said: "There's something about needing to surface those feelings in a space which is comfortable for young men."

## **An antidote to the manosphere?**

Mark Brooks, Director of Policy and Communications at the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, said that masculinity influencers, online figures who promote ideas about what it means to be a "real man", feed off the vulnerabilities of young men who feel something is missing in their life - on online forums referred to as "the Manosphere".

He said: "The problem is that, as my colleague says, these snake oil salesmen are coming in and offering them things that they can't get in the real world."

While these men's groups aren't explicitly designed to combat the manosphere, many believe those drawn to the online space share the same loneliness and search for belonging as members of communities like Shoulder to Shoulder. Both, supporters argue, are responding to a similar need: connection.

Shoulder to Shoulder members currently range from their late 20s to 40s, but Tom hopes to eventually reach younger men too. He doesn't think that the needs of men change much throughout their lives.

He said: "You could look at things like having status amongst your peer group. Those things don't change as you're a man. Our members want those things too. But it's just the way that we cater for those desires is through peer-to-peer interaction."

This drive to reach a younger demographic comes from Tom's own history.

"I was the kind of guy that would have really found the manosphere very appealing," he said. "Because I was lost and I was angry and I didn't really understand myself properly."

Whether these spaces can also help young men find real life connection, remains to be seen.

But after talking to the founders of these groups, one thought keeps coming up. The antidote to loneliness may not have to be a complicated one - perhaps it's simply about not being alone.