**Announcer**

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Enzo Garritano, President and CEO of IHSA. In today's episode, host Ken Rayner and Kathy Martin, IHSA's Mental Health and Wellness Specialist, continue their dialogue on mental health. This episode is focused on toxic masculinity. Ken and Kathy, over to you.

**Ken Rayner:**

Thanks, Enzo. Welcome back to the IHSA Safety Podcast, Kathy Martin. Kathy, today's our fourth podcast on mental health, and in this episode, we are going to focus on toxic masculinity. Yes, I said toxic masculinity, and I'm sure our listeners are scratching their head in the same way I am. Kathy, what is toxic masculinity?

**Kathy Martin:**

Hi, Ken, and thanks for having me back to continue our conversation on workplace mental health. Yes, this topic of toxic masculinity is a really interesting one, and I would encourage listeners today to stay open to what they might be hearing and to definitely make sure that they check out the resources that we'll post later as well. Now, right off the bat, Ken, I want to say and remind the listeners that men are not toxic.

**Ken Rayner:**

Whoo. Thank you, Kathy, because I wasn't sure where we were going with this podcast and I was a little bit worried, so I'm glad you stated men are not toxic. Thank you.

**Kathy Martin:**

Yeah, yeah. Men are not toxic, but men certainly are subject to this concept of toxic masculinity or toxic social and cultural norms that we've placed on each other and that have formed our beliefs and our behaviours around masculinity in our society. It is these norms that have been shown to be toxic or harmful to mental wellbeing, and this will be the primary focus of our conversation and discussion today. We could easily get into the weeds on this complex topic, but I want to try and keep it simple for listeners as it's the concept that is most important and breaking the cycle of behaviours that we really need to focus on, not the history of how and why we got to this place and why society still has toxic masculinity norms still in culture today. It's not about that. It's just about understanding what this concept is, like I said, and how we can maybe break some of those cycles so that we don't continue harming one another.

You did ask me, right off the bat, what is toxic masculinity. As I mentioned, toxic masculinity is a set of social and cultural norms that we, as society, have collectively, and that's both men and women have bought into in the past and continue to perpetuate. Now, one thing about social and cultural norms is that they change and they shift over time, and certainly, between cultures and social settings, they can often differ, so it's important then to really understand what are social and cultural norms as well. A social norm, really, there's shared standards of acceptable behaviors by groups. A social norm can be either informal understandings that govern your behavior or it can be these codes or codified it into rules and laws. We have laws that are often actually keeping us behaving in an acceptable manner. You've put that into a workplace example, Ken. I'm sure you can think how things have shifted over our career.

Things like smoking, for instance. We used to, way back in the day, be allowed to actually smoke at your desk, and we've shifted time. That's not an acceptable behavior anymore, and legislation as well around violence and harassment to name a few. We legislate sometimes behavior that is socially expected, and other times, it's not legislated but it's just common practice and common knowledge. In broader society, like I said, I remember back in the day, we legislated seatbelt use. I don't know, Ken, if you remember when seatbelts, it was optional whether you used seatbelts. But I remember when they did that, often hearing men teasing other men about wearing a seatbelt. It was considered like a "sissy" thing to do. Nowadays, we wouldn't think that way. We'd actually frown upon a guy who got in a car and put on their seatbelt and still felt that way.

We know it's the right thing to do and it's good for our safety, safety of everybody, and so we have shifted over time. Now, cultural norms are, like I said, standards we live by and they are shared expectations and rules that guide behavior of people within social groups. Cultural norms are learned and reinforced from parents, and friends, and teachers, and others while we grow up in society. An example, this might be that in Canadian workplaces, there's a social norm that you don't take someone else's lunch from the fridge because you forgot yours. This is a fairly standard social norm. Most of us are governed by this, to some example. We try to live by this. We don't steal from each other or take without asking, but do we have a company policy about not taking someone's lunch? No, likely not. It's just common cultural norm, like I said, not to steal and to ask before you take something.

You can see that there are countless norms in society, these understood norms within workplaces, families, schools, and generally within social groups in general. We have a set of understood norms around manliness too and masculinity, so let me explain this, because again, we can easily get stuck in the weeds. Not all behaviors and norms around masculinity or manliness are toxic, far from it. But toxic masculinity, like I said, is a set of cultural norms that involve placing pressures on men to behave in a certain way. it's when we have those pressures that are really rigid and we don't give much room for choice. These are often based on outdated and unrealistic stereotypes of manliness. Like I said, it's about the pressures we place on men to live up to masculine ideals that are often unrealistic, and it's these ideals or norms that have been shown to be harmful to both men and women based on the research.

Again, men are oftentimes defined by these outdated and unfounded stereotypes which create unhealthy and unrealistic understanding of what it means to be a man in today's society. For example, assuming men should be protectors and all men should be breadwinners or leaders or associating men with anger, selfishness, or aggression, can be really problematic and damaging. When those beliefs are

based on unproven biases that we have, both individuals and society, we continue to perpetuate that, and boys and men are taught to falsely believe them or try to measure up to them, ultimately harming themselves and others in the process. In many ways, manhood, like womanhood, comes from many expectations in North American societies. As a society, we value, for example, kindness, compassion, and care in women more than we do in men, for some reason. This does not mean that men aren't caring, compassionate, or emotional, quite the opposite. But we, as society, for some reason, have traditionally not valued these traits in men. This can lead men to believe that these traits aren't valuable, and that's the real problem with this concept of toxic masculinity. Men may feel they have to overcompensate or act in a certain way to meet these more traditional standards. We're all human, and as human beings, regardless of your gender, we do have a combination of masculine and feminine traits. We need to allow people to be comfortable being fully human, because let's face it, folks, that's what we are. We all have basic needs, and the last I checked, we all have a whole range of human emotions too. If we don't allow people to accept their wholeness or their humanity, then we're, in essence, asking them to block parts of themselves off from others and from themselves. This really is a recipe for mental health problems to develop. I know that was a lot to digest. I want to just reiterate, men are not toxic. It's these expectations and norms that we've developed over time that cause a whole lot of trouble for men and for women.

**Ken Rayner:**

Yeah, I can see that. That's a good explanation. I've got a better understanding of it now, Kathy, so thank you. How do the pressures that society places on men to live up to these masculine ideals, how does it impact mental health, like both men's and you mentioned women? How does it impact both men and women's mental health?

**Kathy Martin:**

Well, we need to unpack the concept of toxic masculinity a bit further. By the way, some people prefer to use the term hypermasculinity. I'm not really a fan of either term, but if I have to pick one, I'll pick toxic masculinity because hyper is kind of hard to define, whereas toxic, we can all understand, is harmful. Like I said, we're talking about the harmful social norms around masculinity but not masculinity itself, which is a whole other topic. Let's look then at what are the main culprits when we talk about this concept of toxic masculinity based on the research and get to answering your question about the impact of toxic masculinity on men's and women's mental health. According to researchers, toxic masculinity has really three core components. One is toughness, which is the notion that men should be physically strong, behaviourally aggressive, and unemotional.

The second one is anti-femininity, and this is the idea that men should reject anything considered to be feminine, such as showing emotion or accepting of help. The third is power, the assumption that men must work towards obtaining power and status, be it social or financial, to gain respect of others. Now, some of you listeners might say, "Well, I don't buy into any of that," and that's great. I'm hoping society, we are shifting away from that. But traditionally, these were values and traits that were highly regarded in the past and have shaped a lot of our cultural norms around masculinity still to date. A man who might, let's say, personified hypermasculine physical traits not necessarily display behaviors that we were talking about when we talk about toxic masculinity. A good example, I think, is The Rock, Dwayne

Johnson. He certainly displays, on the surface, a lot of those masculine ideals that we idolize, I guess, or idealize in society.

He's strong, he's fairly non-feminine, he's powerful, et cetera. The question is, does he hold onto toxic ideals of masculinity? Does he expect and requires those traits to be an ideal man? Does he internalize that, or does he allow room for other ideals? How does he treat other men, et cetera? Now, these are hard questions to answer without having Dwayne here in front of me to ask. We don't want to get into the weeds here. My point is, you can be a strong, anti-feminine, powerful guy, a "dude's dude", if you will, and not hold onto the toxic ideals or have toxic behaviors because of that. I just want to reinforce that. I guess the way to answer on how this affects men and women's mental health is that if men in our society are held to these ridiculous rigid norms that doesn't allow them to be something other than what we expect them to be, then those who don't measure up are often feeling what you call "less than". You put that in quotes, "less than". They're often feeling like, "I don't quite measure up to those ideals."

We know that when you don't measure up or you have that sense of feeling you're not measuring up, then this can lead to depression, anxiety, and a whole host of other related mental health issues like addictions. It's this sense of having to, like I said, measure up to this expected norm that can be the problem. How many men, if you think about The Rock, how many men have looked up to The Rock and said, "I don't measure up," and have felt a little bit less than when comparing themselves to others? The problem is, why are we conditioned to comparing? Why do we think these traits, as I just described, make a man? These are questions we need to ask ourselves and dig a little deeper. Women, too, are held to some ridiculous, rigid cultural and social norms that are harmful to women's mental health.

For example, it's pretty common social norm, women can't be fat, for some reason. This has been defined by social norms in the past, and of course, we've seen some shifts in what it means to be "fat" in our society. Being a certain size has driven women to do some pretty harmful things to themselves and to others, especially if they don't measure up to that social ideal. We know fat stigma and fat shaming is still a real issue in our society for women, but it's changing with more body positivity. The same concept is happening with challenging "womanness" or womanliness and manliness, and we're starting more and more to challenge men to break down some of the more toxic beliefs around what it is to be a man in today's society. This is a good thing. We're doing this because the research has told us a lot of these old stereotypes, old social norms, were hurtful and they're toxic to our mental wellbeing.

It's important to know, so many things can interact and play a role here on how a man views masculinity or how a man is perceived by others. We often hear this term intersectionality to describe how we experience the world around us or how we're being seen by others in our social group or society. For example, a man's race or ethnicity may intersect and play a role in how he views masculinity, as well as how others perceive him. Likewise, we know that men who identify as LGBTQ+ or who don't conform to those more traditional gender norms, we know from the research and experience that they're at greater risk of experiencing physical and psychological harms due to toxic masculinity.

Good news, like I said, we are shifting as society, and I believe, in most Canadian workplaces, and schools, and in many family households, when it comes to challenging some of the rigid, more outdated norms around masculinity, that this is starting to happen. It's becoming more commonplace to challenge some of these behaviors. But I do, however, think the norms of toughness, and anti-femininity, and power are still very much alive and strong in today's workplaces and in Canadian societies. Maybe not as

rigid, which is good, but definitely still there. The sectors that IHSA serves, I think because they're so highly male-dominated, they're particularly challenged still and have a lot of work in this space. Like I said, I think we're getting there and we need to continue talking about it, and the main reason is it's really impacting men's mental health significantly.

**Ken Rayner:**

I know you mentioned some of the effects of toxic masculinity on women's health. What about the examples of men's health? What are some of the effects and the impacts that toxic masculinity can have, Kathy?

**Kathy Martin:**

Yeah. Well, again, based on the research, toxic masculinity can have many effects on men's health, both physical and mental. A couple of things that jump out to me are things like glorification of unhealthy habits. This stems really from the notion that self-care is for women somehow and can cause some men to treat their bodies like machines if they buy into that notion. They might skip on sleep or work out even if they're injured and push themselves to the physical limits. They may be less likely to seek preventative healthcare, which can lead to more chronic problems down the road. Also, it can perpetuate mental health stigma in the sense that toxic masculinity views depression, anxiety, and substance abuse issues, and mental health problems as weaknesses. It also discourages men from talking about their feelings or seeking mental health treatment. This avoidance may further increase feelings of isolation and loneliness so it can just kind of get the vicious cycle going.

The research will support that, as a result of these and other effects of toxic masculinity, men are less likely than women to access mental health treatments and men are far more likely than women to actually die by suicide. We also know that significantly more men than women have been dying from opioid overdoses. This is just a few ways. I mean, we could talk for hours, Ken, I'm sure on this. But the research does support that some of these behaviors and ideologies definitely have been impacting men's mental health. You're a guy. As an adult male in his 50s, if I'm allowed to say that on air-

**Ken Rayner:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Kathy Martin:**

... how has toxic masculinity affected your life?

Ken Rayner:

Well, it's interesting, Kathy, because just as you were going through the glorification of unhealthy habits and the perpetuation of mental health stigma, I was sort of doing check marks beside and just going, "Yeah, I've dealt with that. Yeah, I've been in that situation. Yeah, I've felt that way." I think for most of us that are of that vintage of growing up in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, I'm sure that everyone's had examples of not being able to speak your mind on things. As you said, it could relate to weakness, certainly pushing yourself or doing things because you believe that's the right thing to do as a male.

There's nothing that says you should, there's no research that backs it up that says it's the right thing to do. It's just something that you've been taught and guided over the years informally, mostly informally in terms of learning from your friends, or from others, or from people that you work with, or whatever it is. But yeah, 100 per cent, it's impacted me to some degree over the course of my life.

**Kathy Martin:**

I think you're pretty common. I mean, it's a very pervasive thing in our society, and I really believe we need to talk about toxic masculinity if we really want to make headway in improving men's mental health in Canada. We know that there's significant gaps between men and women's mental health and certainly around early access to treatment and seeking support. Mental health is a killer. We're losing good men to mental health in Canada, and I would hate it to be because they're too afraid to be vulnerable and show those weaknesses, so yes, it's definitely worth talking about.

**Ken Rayner:**

This podcast, like you said, is great for our members in terms of we support many industries that have been male-dominated for decades. This, hopefully, will be a topic that might be a difficult listen at first, but hopefully, people keep their minds open to it, that they'll get something out of it. Why don't we talk about the workplace thing, Kathy? What steps could a workplace take starting today, let's say, to address toxic masculinity so that both men and women are not negatively impacted in the workplace? What are some things they could do?

**Kathy Martin:**

Well, I'm sure the listeners have realized today that toxic masculinity has some pretty deep roots, and we must keep digging to uproot and challenge this in society and certainly within workplaces. If you've ever really stopped to think why we have no bullying tolerance in schools today or why we might have anti-violence and harassment legislation, well, it's because it isn't because people are bad and we've had to put in these controls. Because we've taught boys in the past in particular that they need to be tough and not take any BS from others and we valued aggression in the past, and so we created a problem and then we try to legislate the problem away instead of teaching good conflict resolution in schools.

We're starting to see more and more emphasis on root cause, getting to the root cause, and that's what we need to do here with workplaces. I've been asked to support IHSA sectors in workplace mental health, and I'm like, "Well, you got to look at the root cause. What's driving some of this?" I'm just here as a messenger, so please don't shoot the messenger. Toxic masculinity is driving some of this in our workplaces. Ken, I guess what can workplaces do, start talking about it, start looking at things a bit differently. Ken, if I were to ask you, how did you resolve conflict on the playground when you were growing up?

**Ken Rayner:**

Oh, yeah. Grade school, middle school, high school, for the most part, a fight after school if you had a real strong disagreement with somebody, which solved nothing, by the way. The problem didn't go away. It got worse, because after the fight, you felt terrible. It didn't feel like you did something great or you accomplished something that made you feel... Or you harassed the person or teased them..

**Kathy Martin:**

Especially if you lost the fight, right, Ken? I mean, it's one thing if you won the fight, it's another thing if you lost the fight, right?

**Ken Rayner:**

Either way, I don't think you felt good about it. Yeah. It didn't lead to resolutions, and so it didn't work. From my perspective, none of that worked. I'm glad we changed it, because there's got to be different ways to get to the outcome that we want.

**Kathy Martin:**

I think, like I said, we sometimes try to legislate some of these problems away, but my guess is that it's still there in different ways. It manifests maybe a little different. It might look a little different. It might not be the fist fights on the playground, but it might be off the playground on the walk home or it might be online aggression. We hear a lot about cyber bullying, and we often... If you look to the south of us, the south of the border, these mass school shootings, they're pretty scary. Where's this all coming from? There's still a lot of pent-up anger and things that aren't coming out that we need to allow boys to come to terms with at a much younger age. Men, and men of all ages, we need to allow them to be human, not machines. I guess I'll get to the point here.

We've got to get to that point where everyone be vulnerable, and seek help when they need to, and realize that they're human, and not to be ridiculed or, worse, self-judgment. We so often prevent ourselves from seeking care and help because of our own self-judgment. We talk about self-stigma when we talk about mental health a lot, and men are really impacted by self-stigma, self-judgment, and so we need to allow men to be human. Workplaces, like I said, need to be talking, taking a closer look at how they might be upholding some of these traditional social values that might be toxic. Construction, don't get me started, but how do you behave on the boots on the ground, on the job site? How is toxic masculinity still playing out? How can you challenge that? What do we value and reward in our workplaces? Like I said, do we uphold our violence and harassment and those anti-bullying policies?

We might have a great policy, but are we enforcing them? How do we tackle mental health stigma? Like I just mentioned, do we have men telling their stories of vulnerability and how they sought help and maybe found recovery for mental health and addiction issues, or is it just a women thing to do? That's for the girls to talk about in the workplace. Are the guys talking about it? We need to tackle toxic masculinity, like I said, if we want to tackle mental health stigma and help improve help-seeking behaviors among men. We know that based on the research, that those highly male-dominated workplaces also see heightened impacts from toxic masculinity. It's the old saying, throw a bunch of guys together and they'll act like guys. We need to challenge what that acting like guys is and the acceptable behaviors, and we need to challenge some of those past outdated norms.

Again, like I said, just talk about it and try the safety talk. We do have a safety talk on toxic masculinity on the website, so maybe give that a go. There is a great documentary that's been done that I really enjoyed. It's called The Mask You Live In, so consider watching the trailer, which is on the safety talk. On the second page there, you can look at the trailer. If you're interested, I encourage you all to watch the show, the full show, maybe even watch it with a group from work. It's really up to workplaces and for

champions within the workplace to step up and be brave in having these conversations, which can feel a bit intimidating at first. Ken, when I brought out the topic of toxic masculinity, I'm sure you were like, "What?" It's a good thing.

It's a good thing to be brave, and it's a good thing bravery is one of those things we expect of men. We need men to be brave and actually talk about this tough stuff. Anyways, I guess it's one thing for women, like myself, or even a non-gendered conforming man to stand up and talk about this, but what about all the other guys? We need men to stand up for each other, in my opinion. I'm going to just turn the tables on you once again, Ken. As you mentioned earlier, you've experienced toxic masculinity throughout your life, so what could you do as a man today differently to start combating toxic masculinity?

**Ken Rayner:**

Well, certainly, I've got much more awareness of it today through what you've shared with us, Kathy, so I appreciate that. The other one I think is just about reflecting in terms of... I probably can't come up with any example of toxic masculinity that I was exposed to where it was a positive in my life. I think it's about starting to challenge some of that in terms of if I'm with a group of friends or in any type of setting, and that some of the toxic masculinity bubbles up, whether it's one person teasing another or whatever it is. I think it's about just speaking up and looking to break the cycle, because if we don't do it in our generation, then we're just going to pass it on to the next one to deal with.

I think, to me, it's about the next time I hear something and after we've gone through this today, Kathy, then I need to make a comment when I hear somebody making a statement or something that aligns with toxic masculinity and just bring some awareness to them as well, because I would say that there's a lot of men out there that aren't aware of the impact it has on others and on themselves. Yeah. I thank you for that, because I was a little skeptical going into this podcast, going, "Oh, boy. Toxic masculinity, where's this one going to go?" But I'm really thankful that you've brought it up, and I thank you for raising it to our attention, and hopefully that others will see it in the same light. Thank you very much, Kathy, for, again, helping us unpack some mental health challenges and some solutions on how to address them. Thank you very much.

**Kathy Martin:**

You're welcome.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Thank you for listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast* in our series on mental health. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us on ihsa.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.