

# Men's cuddling group aims to redefine masculinity and heal trauma

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by Aneri Pattani, Updated: March 25, 2019



Twice a month, half a dozen men gather in Plymouth Meeting to help each other work through past traumas.

Their chosen method of healing? Cuddles.

It may seem odd, but members of the [Men's Therapeutic Cuddle Group](#) say the practice has helped them cope with everything from childhood sexual abuse to the loss of family members when they were young.

The two-year-old group draws men from various backgrounds: a 37-year-old Mormon who works as an airport gate agent, a 57-year-old married father of three, a 62-year-old retiree. There is a range of sexual orientations.

At a time when traditional ideas of manhood are facing scrutiny and such terms as toxic masculinity are becoming more widely known through the MeToo movement, the group aims to provide new ways for men to express themselves.

"So often, we're taught that to be an emotional stoic is the mark of manhood," said Scott Turner, a 46-year-old interior designer and cofounder of the group. "If you show any emotional weakness or vulnerability, that's a failure to your title of a man."

But "if we expect men to be emotionally sensitive to the needs of others, they first need to be able to build an emotional vocabulary," he said.

Part of that involves learning that physical touch extends beyond aggression or sex. Platonic affection can be a doorway to emotional closeness.

"It's not the ends of what we're doing," Turner said. "It's part of a larger toolbox of healing."

Unlike professional cuddling services, which are gaining popularity in cities across the United States, the group charges no fees and members are not required to undergo training.

Although the meet-ups are not open to the public (members must be interviewed and approved), the group held a demonstration for The Inquirer.

At the beginning of the session, everyone agreed not to engage in sexual touch and to ask for consent before each action. They gathered in a huddle and breathed meditatively.



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

Members of the Men's Therapeutic Cuddling meet-up demonstrate for The Inquirer how they open and close each meeting with a group hug.

The cuddling started with men pairing up to do "the motorcycle hold," in which one man sits with his back against another man's chest, as if they were riding together on a motorcycle. Some massaged their partner's shoulders or hands, while others stroked the other person's beard. Many closed their eyes as the room fell into silence. After 15 minutes, they switched to a new partner.

For the second half of the session, the men cuddled as one large group in what they call a "puppy pile." Men lay with their heads in each other's laps, chatted, and joked.

It's meant to be a space where men feel safe sharing their innermost thoughts, said Kevin Eitzenberger, 57, who founded the group with Turner. That can be challenging in other areas of their lives, where they're expected to be "the strong provider."

In the group, "they learn it's OK to be a little fractured," Eitzenberger said.

The importance of vulnerability

As a child, TJ McDonnell was molested by a neighbor. He didn't tell anyone, ashamed he'd done something wrong. For years, he kept his distance from others.

"I never connected with people very well, even my siblings," said McDonnell, now 62 and living in Montgomery County.

Getting therapy and attending a support group helped, but McDonnell credits the men's cuddling group for teaching him that emotional intimacy and physical touch aren't always abusive.

"It allowed me to experience what good friendships are, what brothers are," he said.

Another member, Ryan Hancock, has become like a son to McDonnell. Hancock's children even call McDonnell grandpa.



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

Scott Turner (from left), Kyle Hoffman, and TJ McDonnell share their thoughts.

"These types of groups can be healthy and helpful for men and women," said Chris Liang, a licensed psychologist and associate professor of counseling psychology at Lehigh University.

Liang researches the effect of masculinity on health and was part of a board that helped the American Psychological Association (APA) formulate new guidelines on working with boys and men.

Many men never learn healthy ways to deal with stress, Liang said. Then, it can emerge in harmful ways.

According to the APA, men commit 90 percent of homicides in the U.S. and represent 77 percent of homicide victims. They're also more than three times as likely as women to die by suicide, and their life expectancy is nearly five years shorter, largely because of both violence and the health impact of stress.

Liang hopes that such groups as the cuddling meet-up can help men move beyond one restrictive definition of masculinity. Although those with more serious concerns may want to seek therapy, he said, "if this is something that's more comfortable for men ... then it can do a whole lot of good."

### A growing movement of men's support groups

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When Kevin Eitzenberger was 11, his 7-year-old brother died. Growing up, Eitzenberger didn't spend much time with his father. The two had little in common.

Both experiences left Eitzenberger without a role model to show him what it meant to be a man.

"It led me to believe I was less than," he said. "That I wasn't manly."



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

Kevin Eitzenberger sits on the floor during a demonstration that the Men's Therapeutic Cuddling meet-up held for The Inquirer.

In 2008, he discovered a group called [the ManKind Project](#) (MKP), which would help him overcome that feeling.

Founded about 30 years ago, MKP is a nonprofit focused on building male community through more than 900 men's support groups in dozens of countries.

"We want men to come in and figure out what their ideal of manhood is," said Boysen Hodgson, communications director of MKP in the U.S. "It's not something that can be imposed or prescribed to you."

The group doesn't focus on cuddling, but it does promote the idea of being open and vulnerable with other men.

"Asking for affection, asking for time, asking for help from other men is scary," Hodgson said. "But it's a very important skill for men to learn."

Studies published in 2010 and 2014 found that participating in MKP programming [improved men's psychological well-being for up to two years](#).

For Eitzenberger, MKP helped him realize that wanting a connection with other men and seeking their acceptance was OK. It led him to start the cuddling group.

Now he receives about two requests a week from people looking to join the meet-up.

## A man among men

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At the cuddling group demonstration, Ryan Hancock absentmindedly touched TJ McDonnell's ear. Later, McDonnell squeezed in between Turner and Eitzenberger lying on the floor, calling himself "the cream in the cookie."

In this setting, touch was no more notable than asking about someone's day.

Some men teared up as they discussed their regrets as fathers. Others were playful.



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

A group hug opens and closes each meeting.

At the end of the session, the group huddled and took turns completing the phrase, "As a man among men, I feel..."

"Grateful to be with all of you," Turner said.

"Worthy of connection," Hancock said.

McDonnell, going last, said, "Loved, accepted, and included."

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