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### On Men Expressing Emotion

The Cronin family is made of tall, strong, and stoic Irish men. This has never been the stated expectation but a staunch example set for my brothers and I. Growing up, at the beginning and end of family gatherings I was smothered by hugs and kisses from my endless barrage of aunts. When it came time to say goodbye to my grandfather, it was never a hug (and surely never a kiss) but rather a handshake and, “it was nice to see you Patrick”. As I’ve grown older I’ve come into awareness of my grandfather's, almost comical, inability to express his affection for his grandsons through words and physical touch. At the end of his life, I devilishly reveled in attacking my Parkinson ridden grandfather, left unable to protect himself, with a big hug and “I love you” whenever I said goodbye, knowing quite well he was expecting a handshake. This is not to say Cronin men don’t love each other and their families. They choose to show their love through action, through cheesy t-shirts and mugs with the Cronin family emblem given as presents for Christmas and birthdays.

In the past few years, I’ve started to grapple with my own feelings of love, anxiety, frustration and fulfillment. My own father, while capable of giving hugs and saying “I love you”, never taught me to express my emotions verbally, which I now find myself yearning to do. To be clear, it was never a punishable offense to talk about a romantic interest or insecurity, and it is not as though my father is a hardened angry man. In fact, my father is one of the nicest, most easy going people I know. I, on the other hand, have never been very easy going. I’m rather high

strung, hyper motivated, and annoyingly curious. With the onset of adulthood and the radical shifts of puberty I've found myself struggling to follow the example of an internalized man, set by my father. High levels of motivation come with high levels of expectations, during my junior and senior years of highschool I reached more influential schoolwork and watched people around me start to mature and begin to date. I found myself struggling to cope with the pressure and anxiety of school and life. I yearned to talk about my struggles but found that my two brothers, male friends, and my role model, my father, were all disposed to not sharing such conversations. To them, it just was not a conversation that was necessary, unlike yardwork or the celtics.

This past year I finally caved in, there wasn't any specific breaking point, but I started going to therapy. Wellbeing is hard to describe. The definition of such an all encompassing word varies from person to person depending on what aspects of wellbeing the individual chooses to prioritize. In an attempt to define the health of an individual, one aspect of wellbeing, Power and Faden wrote, "While health is a state or condition that in many respects can be described in organic or functional terms, it is important for our account to note that the absence of health refers to more than biological malfunctioning or impairment to some functional ability such as mobility, sight, or hearing" (Powers and Faden, pp. 15-29). It seems to me that the prevailing opinion among the males in my life is that feelings are not a direct front on health. I'm sure my grandfather would have respected that Hall of Famer Lou Gherig, who when diagnosed with ALS, gave his famous speech on how lucky he was to get to play baseball as a profession. To men like my grandfather and dad, anxieties and worries are superfluous, a waste of others' time if brought up and not a health concern. Fear, embarrassment and discomfort held me hostage to this belief. For a long time I would have rather worked out to the point of collapse than talk about my emotions. See it's not necessarily a bad thing to be as reserved and humble as my father, but my

disposition found itself running up against a gender norm that my predecessors both constructed and obeyed. A gender norm that I have tried to lay out but will vaguely label: men are expected to keep their feelings to themselves. This idea was entrenched in me, so when the idea of therapy was suggested I scoffed. Scoffed because I was afraid my brothers would consider me weak, scoffed because I was embarrassed, scoffed because I was uncomfortable admitting I didn't meet the standards of what I had been shown it meant to be a man. But now I go to therapy, and it's great. I enjoy talking about my emotions and taking care of my mental health, which I decided was just as important to me as taking care of my body. I find that by talking about the anxieties and worries that live in my head I unload their weight off my shoulders. One day I hope men adopt the Powers and Faden's definition of health, which includes mental and emotional wellbeing. I imagine a world where fathers teach their kids to throw a baseball and talk about their deepest fears. I have seen in friends the weight of holding in one's worries and have felt the success of overcoming the gender norm of not talking about one's emotions, I want this for others. If we as humans are able to make this happen I believe we might unlock a plethora of social good.

## Reference

“Justice and Well-Being.” *Social Justice: The Moral Foundations of Public Health and Health Policy*, by Madison Powers and Ruth R. Faden, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 15–29.