



AN INTERVIEW WITH KENNY MAMMARELLA-D'CRUZ, THE FOUNDER OF *MENSPEAK*

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ABSTRACT

Menspeak is a non-hierarchical, male-centred British men's group. Its underlying philosophy encourages men to explore their passion, their purpose, and their soul (rather than to subscribe to a theoretically informed code of conduct prescribed by experts). The group encourages men "to live beyond" their "histories and explore" their respective identities and their needs. Group members support one another and hold one another accountable in their quest to become the men they want to be.

Keywords: boys, males, masculinity, men, *Menspeak*

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Jerome: Tell me a bit about yourself: were you born in England? What made you interested in helping men?

Kenny I'm a refugee from Uganda. My parents were both born in East Africa, and we were on Idi Amin's death list. Officially we are refugees from Uganda of Goan heritage with a Portuguese culture who ended up in refugee camps in the UK. My father was smuggled to Italy from Uganda. Once we were reunited, we moved to his refugee camp, then to a small town in Wales. We were the only non-white family of the community.

I started holding men's groups because I wanted to be met at depth by my own friends after travelling and working abroad for five years. When I came back to London, my friends were distracted by drink, drugs, money, power, sex, love for the wrong reasons, and I wanted more out of them. So, I called a dozen or so men into my living room 20 years ago and asked for more from them. It's grown to hundreds of men and free e-books for men to start their own groups around the world, as well as live and online men's group facilitation trainings. My latest e-book is selling for £4.95 but free for those who cannot afford it.

Jerome: Is it correct to say you are the founder of the *Menspeak* men's group? What is the underlying philosophy, or what are the group's objectives?

Kenny: Yes, I'm the founder. The groups are different to therapy and other personal development groups, because they are as near to daily life as possible. People get to tell the truth and really get to know not only who they are, but who they no longer need to be. And it's non-hierarchical, so I'm not the leader or the smart one—we all learn from each other's experiences, successes, failures, and we get to share our fears and fantasies. We get to live beyond our histories and explore who we are, what we want, and support each other and hold each other accountable to grow into these lives.

Jerome: Why did you see the need to form such a group? Is it a registered charity? Who comprises the members? Is membership free?

Kenny: When I was about 30, I had everything that I wanted in my life apart from sunshine. I went travelling and ended up travelling the world for five years.

The time came to return to the UK. I hooked up with my old friends, and I made a few new male friends. Something felt off though. I didn't feel met. I felt like my friends, especially my old friends, were distracted by money and power addictions, love and sex addictions, drug and alcohol addictions-any distractions from themselves they could find. So, I guess they took one fork in the road, and I took another. Mine had more passion and maybe purpose and soul-searching, and I missed that: I needed to share that with them. I needed to be met at some depth. And I couldn't really join their world. So, I called a meeting of a dozen or so friends in my front room and said to them, "I don't know what a men's group is, but I'm starting one now. You're all in it. And I need to be met at some depth, and I will still go raving to you and hang out like we've always hung out, but I need this depth, and if you can't meet me here then you're chucked. "

People got to hear about our group and people told friends who told friends, and before I knew it, this idea took form with ground rules and a check-in round and structure, and I took it out of my lounge and into a public space. And today, I hold about a dozen men's groups a month (a few men still come along who were at that first meeting!) as well as trainings to train others to facilitate men's groups: men, women, therapists, coaches, and anyone off the street who wants to learn the tools of running a simple men's group.

It is a branch of my private consulting company, though we're making the application to for *Menspeak* to become a charity and separate entity.

The members are very varied. Some have outgrown their life, a lot of people have everything crossed off their list, but they realize that they're still empty inside. Also, some men who are empty inside, and they don't have anything crossed off their list, or those going through changes in their lives, those who want to fall in love, or those becoming parents, those changing career or who are at some sort of a crossroads.

Also, men who have not really had great relationships with men, maybe it's because

of boarding school, maybe because like me, they were more around mothers than mates.

These days, there's a lot happening around turning boys into men: initiations and trainings, howling in the woods and getting naked and stuff like that. And men who've done that, as well as men who've tried the pickup artist community, and various other social, sporting, 12 steps communities show up to our meetings. Once they've done all of those or alongside those, including going to therapy, they will come to the men's group to use it as a kind of stepping stone from all of those things into daily life in a calm, grounded, connected manner. At *Menspeak* they can connect with their authentic selves and other men and test drive who they think they are, who they might be, get some feedback, and live it into daily life.

We charge an entry fee for most events to cover costs, and these vary by the type of event and who's facilitating. Generally, a group is between £10-£25 though we have concessions, and we never refuse men on financial grounds.

Since Covid-19 we hold weekday lunchtime mini-men's groups by donation, to help keep men connected during social isolation and to take the edge off anything that might be triggered from the past or feared from the future, so in the present we are connected, supported, and able to respond to the challenges that life may bring.

Jerome Are there branches or arms of *Menspeak* men's group in other parts of London, Scotland, and Ireland?

Kenny: Currently we only have men's groups running online, though before Covid-19 we held them in Notting Hill, South Kensington and Camden Town. There are people using my men's group format all over the world, and I hear from them from time to time by email. We hope to have accredited trainings up and running next year to spread the tools with quality across the globe. The online groups and facilitator trainings have become very popular of late.

Jerome Tell me more about the work of the *Menspeak* Online groups? And your Newsletter-how long has it been circulating?

Kenny: Online groups are held via Zoom, and in much the same way as the in-person

groups. It's hard to put into words the difference. It's not worse or better, just different. But it's amazing to have men from all over the world gathering and getting real with each other. When Covid-19 hit, we launched MenCheck-in, a daily weekday online check-in, by donation. This proved invaluable for some men: it's a brilliant daily sanity check and chance to connect and get stuff off your chest.

I launched my newsletter about five years ago, and we have a growing influx of subscribers. I love sharing my tips, tools and techniques, and I enjoy great feedback from those who read it. It's got to be fun, as well as insightful!

Jerome: In your view, during the past 10 years, has the masculinity crisis worsened or have you seen signs of improvement?

Kenny: I think it's improved. Ten years ago, people weren't even talking about men's mental health. It wasn't newsworthy or given much consideration. Today it's almost a buzz word, and it's very popular. I think there have been lots of steps in a positive direction with many male public figures opening up about their issues. The younger generation are especially so much more articulate about their mental health, and it's inspiring to listen to how sharp and insightful they are. Sometimes there needs to be a crisis, or breakdown even, before there can be breakthrough!

Jerome: How have you and your groups observed International Men's Day in England?

Kenny: We've done many different things over the years. My favourites have been when we hired a farm in Essex and cooked together, sat around the fire talking, listening, and laughing into the night. Another year we had a story-telling evening and invited men to spontaneously stand up and share their stories before men and women. An elderly man sang a song about touch, intimacy, and loneliness which makes my heart open whenever I listen to it. I've never known a room to be so moved to tears with open hearts for such a long time. We mostly hold men's groups to mark the day as well, put stories in the media, invite men and women to communicate with the men who have shaped them, and the feedback has been astounding.

Jerome: Do you believe that activists should collaborate with governments to solve problems affecting men?

Kenny: I think they should collaborate as well as create their own means of supporting men—unfortunately we can't rely on the government for everything, and we have to empower ourselves—then share the power. If you see an issue and you're passionate about it, then surely, it's better to collaborate rather than going it alone, but also as Gandhi said "be the change you want to see in the world. " If, for example, you're passionate about men opening up and sharing their issues before it's too late, then demonstrate sharing your issues, and create spaces for men to share their issues.

Jerome: You recently began the *Menspeak* Radio show to educate the public. Tell me how you have used this medium to deal with men's issues.

Kenny: With *Menspeak* Radio each episode involves exceptional men courageously sharing their most intimate stories. We don't put on a show and pretend we have it together all the time, and we hang out with depth, which hopefully allows the listener to re-think the way they think about their own masks and about men and friendship. We've had everything from a homeless man, to personalities in the public eye, to men who regularly come to men's groups who were willing to take part in a live or recorded men's group and show the world how we show up as ourselves to each other and communicate with consciousness, depth and laughter! We don't believe in experts to give our power away to or to save us, though we listen to the facts and learn from the experiences of others. We certainly demonstrate how we believe men's issues could be solved by discussing our own and sharing our outcomes, so listeners can learn from our experiences and follow our lead, should they find our offerings helpful.

Jerome: Do you believe that an issue such as parental alienation affects more boys than girls? If so, why?

Kenny: I don't know if it affects boys more than girls, but I do know that it has such a strong effect that it should not be ignored. I've worked with a lot of men who have issues with depression, lethargy and myalgic encephalomyelitis (or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome), and more often than not they did not get much attention from their mothers growing up. So many men who work with me privately and come to men's groups lacked a father, a present father, or a sober adult role model, and the lack of a

self-respecting adult male has caused an array of issues and deep damage to so many.

Jerome: You are also a pioneer in beginning the *MenFacilitate* facilitator trainings. Approximately how many men have you helped?

Kenny: We've trained probably around a hundred people to facilitate men's groups, and I know of at least 50 groups that have been started after that training. Once you add in the fact that each man who comes to a men's group has an entire network of people around him, whom he then affects, then the numbers really add up. I've heard amazing feedback from partners and family members of men's-group men, saying that they're so much more stable, emotionally-available, kind, and caring. I originally held the day trainings quarterly; now it's monthly, and we're looking at fortnightly to meet demand. Beyond the trainings are the free [Quickstart Guides](#) that people have used to start their own groups the world over, and those have been downloaded in the thousands. I'd imagine far greater numbers with the [How to Facilitate an Online Men's Group e-book](#) that will soon be available-so necessary in these days of social isolation and the issues and opportunities that that brings.

Jerome: Is counselling a solution for men seeking healthier relationships? Or should we prescribe medication for a happier & healthier life?

Kenny: I think each person deserves an individual solution: there is no one-size-fits-all. There's evidence showing that women in general prefer one-on-one counselling, where men prefer side-by-side communication, but that doesn't mean it's the same for everyone. Many men see a therapist alongside their men's groups, and if that works for them then great! I do think that for men, men's groups (or "social medicine" as best-selling author Johann Hari called our groups), should be a serious option and ideally prescribed before medication or therapy. They're cheaper, and with no side-effects! I've always feared medication, though I know little about meds, and I've never taken them. I've seen men safely reduce their dosages while attending regular men's groups, and I've seen men in danger, on the edge, manage themselves better while on medication, enabling them to work safely through their stuff and get

back in balance, or better still, move forward in their lives rather than just surviving.

Jerome: Would an increase of social workers and psychologists reduce issues such as domestic violence and homicides?

Kenny: I imagine it would, but it's an expensive and also quite impersonal solution. I think providing peer-led talking and wellbeing groups would be a much cheaper, and probably a more effective solution. Those who are angry and violent usually just need to be heard and understood, not judged or fixed by a professional. That's not to say that I'm against social workers and psychologists, quite the contrary. I believe a man needs to be met in his places of past-and-present darkness, so he can be in control of his pain and not inflict it on himself or others. Once these places are met, they no longer have the ability to take a persona over as the red mist falls.

AUTHOR PROFILES



Jerome Teelucksingh is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of the West Indies. He revived International Men's Day (19 November) and also initiated the inaugural observance of World Day of the Boy Child (16 May). Dr. Teelucksingh has been promoting IMD since 1999, and it has spread to approximately 90 countries.

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Kenny Mammarella-D'Cruz is a best-selling author and the founder of *Menspeak* men's groups. He has been dubbed "The Man Whisperer" by Newsweek. For the past 20 years, Kenny has created safe spaces for men's voices to be heard, empowering men to open up and talk about their mental and emotional health. Kenny is a regular commentator on men's mental health issues in the media, and also runs training workshops for practitioners and the public on how to facilitate men's groups.

Contact details: <https://mensgroups.co.uk/contact-us/>

More information about *Menspeak* is available here: www.mensgroups.co.uk

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