



## What do you need right now?

by Rick Belden

Being asked what you need for the very first time by someone who really wants to know and then finding yourself coming up blank is, I think, a common experience for many men. In the very first men's group I ever attended, virtually every man (including me) was unable to answer the first time the facilitator asked him, "What do you need right now?"

The most common immediate reaction was disorientation and confusion, as if the question itself was somehow beyond comprehension. A lot of men were rendered speechless. Some shrugged and said, "Nothing." Some looked away or stared at the floor, as if ashamed at the prospect that they might even have needs. Others made jokes or attempted to change the subject. But almost no one was able to answer the question truthfully and sincerely.

In exploring our reactions and discomfort with the question as a group, it became clear very quickly that most of us (including me) were unaccustomed to expecting anyone else to genuinely care about what we needed, much less give it to us. As we dug a little deeper into our individual experiences and histories, many of us found ourselves feeling very angry about how little our needs had mattered to those around us throughout our lives. There was often a great sadness as well. In some cases, the grief expressed was profound.

One of the first steps for many of us was to learn that it was okay for us to respond to "What do you need right now?" by simply saying, "I don't know." Perhaps this seems like an obvious answer to the question, but it's one that doesn't come easy for many men. "I don't know" is a state of mind men have often been taught to equate with weakness; it is something we've been conditioned not to acknowledge to ourselves, much less say out loud.

The work required to break through the associated resistance was often substantial for the men involved, and sometimes quite grueling. But a man who is honestly able to say “I don’t know” when he is asked what he needs right now has taken a powerful first step forward in the direction of reconnecting with himself, and those of us who began to answer in that fashion generally found ourselves pleasantly surprised at our ability to respond with something far more specific very soon thereafter.

As we made our first attempts at saying what we needed, some other patterns began to emerge. There was a tendency for many men to talk about their needs in very abstract or high level terms (e.g., “I need more money,” “I need a new job,” “I need a girlfriend,” etc.) that sidestepped the “right now” part of the question. Time after time, the facilitator patiently but firmly steered each man who answered in this manner back into the group, back into the room, and back into real time “right now” experience with the other men who were there with him. This was the next hurdle for many of us, because it meant answering the question not only in “right now” terms, but in terms of telling the other men, “This is what I need from *you* right now.”

Admitting our needs to other men was another challenging taboo for most of us. We had little or no experience understanding and expressing our needs, and many of our initial attempts felt awkward and clumsy at first. It was also very hard for most of us to trust the other men. Men are often most deeply wounded in groups of other males while growing up, and are therefore highly protected against letting it happen again. But the group provided us with what we most needed, a safe space to practice and make mistakes, and we all made progress, in our own way and at our own pace. It was beautiful and often quite moving to watch these men brave the truly daunting risks of opening and unfolding themselves before others in ways they never had before, and such a great and unforgettable privilege to be present as both a participant and a witness.

I’ve been in several other men’s groups over the years since then, with scores of other men, and I’ve continued to see this same dynamic over and over. Many men, when presented with the question “What do you need right now?”, honestly cannot answer because they learned long ago that their needs were not important. A man who is disconnected from his own needs is truly disconnected from himself, and well down the path to trouble in his life. The good news is that, with proper support, attention, and assistance, every man can learn to answer this very important question consistently with clarity and confidence.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [\*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood\*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [\*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within\*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).