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## Reply to “Technical comment on Horton, E. K. J., Schermerhorn, N., & Hanel, P. H. P. (2025). The impact of toxic masculinity on restrictive emotionality and mental health seeking support”

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We thank Jonason and Gruda (2026) for engaging with our work (Horton et al., 2026). They raise some criticism, which we are addressing in this reply.

### 1. Alleged conceptual weaknesses and theoretical assumptions

We agree with Jonason and Gruda's implication within their abstract that it is important to understand men's health given that men (vs. women) are significantly less likely to seek support for mental health issues (American Institute for Boys and Men, 2026), less likely to be diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2026), but more likely to engage in substance abuse (see Chatmon, 2020) and die by suicide cross-culturally (see Schumacher, 2019).

Jonason and Gruda accuse us of using an outdated catharsis perspective of masculinity and emotion that lacks empirical support (p. 1). It would be redundant to discuss here the numerous empirical findings described in our paper that have examined how traditional ideologies around what it means to be masculine have prescribed men to suppress their emotions to highlight their toughness (Levant & Richmond, 2008; Mahalik et al., 2003; Thompson Jr & Pleck, 1986; see also Jakupcak et al., 2005; Vogel et al., 2011).

We do adopt a constructionist perspective (social role theory) to masculinity in the present research, building upon past work that shows how attitudes and behaviours related to gender are shaped by an individual's environment and social learning. We do not, however, assert that gender norms are “*entirely learned*” as Jonason and Gruda imply (p. 1, emphasis added). Evolutionary/biological perspectives are important to understanding how gendered ideologies and identities manifest in our culture (Wood & Eagly, 2002), yet it is disingenuous to argue, as Jonason and Gruda do, that the evolutionary/biological explanation would be how we understand why these norms emerge and why men are uniquely susceptible to them. In fact, Jonason and Gruda's reading of the article they use to make this point (Logoz et al., 2023) is incomplete, at best. Logoz et al. (2023) specifically state that their findings “further strengthen the importance of social role theories for explaining gender-based violence” (p. 11) and that the “buffering effects of expressive suppression did not remain statistically significant after controlling for covariates and multiple testing” (p. 11). We do not disagree that emotional regulation and/or emotional suppression may have positive functions *in certain contexts*, but the existing research currently suggests that in the context of mental health support seeking, masculine ideology (including emotional control and self-reliance) functions negatively (see Üzümcüker, 2025, for a recent meta-analysis).

Finally, we understand that there are debates around the term “toxic masculinity” in both its use and its content. We have adopted an

operationalization used in previous work (see Horton et al., 2026, p. 2) that is aligned with more recent developments of measures of toxic masculinity (Sanders et al., 2024). We also clearly articulate that masculinity, itself, is not toxic but rather certain manifestations. Thus, Jonason and Gruda's accusations that we are relying on “sensationalist terminology” (p. 2) “vilifying the masculine” (p.1) reveal that the motivations of the technical comment may have been motivated by exactly what they have accused us of – being politically motivated.

### 2. Alleged psychometric issues and tautology

Jonason and Gruda claim that our predictor, toxic masculinity, and mediator, restrictive emotionality, measure the same underlying construct because the two variables are highly correlated,  $r = .59$ . While we agree that the two variables are conceptually related, they are distinctly defined and measured. Also, correlations of a similar magnitude are fairly common between related yet distinct variables such as Machiavellianism and narcissism,  $r = .57$ , or Machiavellianism and employee's use of hard tactics,  $r = .64$  (Jonason et al., 2012).

Further, Jonason and Gruda write “The ‘Self-Reliance’ subscale is the operational inverse of the outcome ‘Help-Seeking’; finding a negative correlation between preferring to solve problems alone and seeking help is tautological” (p. 1). While we agree that on a surface level this indeed seems tautological, a look at the items (available at <https://osf.io/fwc9t>), and at the medium-sized correlations between self-reliance and the two help-seeking dimensions of  $-.42$  and  $-.44$  in our Table 2 (Horton et al., 2026), would have revealed that self-reliance is not just the inverse of the two dimensions of help seeking behaviour (cf. also Logoz et al., 2023). The correlations between extreme self-reliance and help-seeking behaviour are even weaker,  $r_s = -.28$  and  $-.17$  (also Table 2). Furthermore, self-reliance and help-seeking behaviour are conceptually different: One is a personality trait, the other a behavioural outcome.

### 3. Alleged statistical irregularities and data interpretation

Jonason and Gruda write that our mediation analysis in fact shows a suppression effect. However, since both  $c$  and  $c'$  are non-significant in both mediation models, this does not support the claim of a suppression effect. Nevertheless, we agree that interpreting this significant indirect effect is difficult to interpret.

Jonason and Gruda further claim that we report 165 correlations in Study 1 which increases the type I error rate. First, we report the correlations between 15 variables (Table 1), meaning that there are sum  $(1:14) = 105$  pairwise correlations, not 165. Second, five of the variables are demographic variables which we included for readers interested in

demographic effects (such as age effects). If we only count the correlations between the 10 theoretically relevant variables, we end up with 45 correlations. Third, and most importantly, even if we were to Bonferroni-correct for 105 tests, most of our effects survive, since most  $ps < .001$ . For example, the  $p$ -value of the correlation that is most interesting to us between toxic masculinity and restrictive emotionality,  $r = .59$ , is  $p = .000000000000000039716$ . As a side note, it seems strange to claim on one hand that findings are trivial because the variables are all measuring the same underlying construct and on the other hand accuse us of fishing for results.

Moreover, Jonason and Gruda criticise as “fishing for results” that we conduct “explanatory” item-level analyses by correlating toxic masculinity with the 18-items that we used to measure the two types of health seeking behaviour. This *exploratory* analysis (we do not use the word “explanatory” in our paper), which was suggested by a reviewer, helps us to get a better understanding whether toxic masculinity is in fact unrelated to various forms of health seeking behaviour. By labelling this analysis as exploratory, setting the  $\alpha$ -threshold to .001 – which is overly conservative because even a Bonferroni-correction would have required a threshold of  $.05/18 \approx .0028$  –, and also not mentioning these findings in the abstract, we believe we followed common norms for describing exploratory findings.

Finally, Jonason and Gruda suggest that we use politically motivated reasoning to explain these exploratory findings. Instead, they can be better explained by men preferring “advice from dominant, trusted figures (e.g., priests) over strangers (e.g., therapists)” (p. 2). First, it is curious to provide a rationale for findings that are considered false-positives. Second, we did not measure actual closeness of the person from which the participants were more likely to seek help from. In fact, we also found and report in the main text that toxic masculinity was negatively correlated with help seeking from an intimate partner and friends,  $ps < .001$ , thus challenging the proposed alternative explanation by Jonason and Gruda.

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