

1. Grief as a Catalyst for Purpose

Pasco founded Men's Circles not from a place of professional expertise or a carefully constructed business plan, but from the wreckage of personal loss. Two of his close friends took their own lives. And in reflecting on what had happened, Pasco noticed something that stopped him cold: both men had lost themselves before they lost their lives. Their identity, their sense of belonging, their ability to speak honestly about what was happening inside them had quietly eroded long before the crisis became visible. Pasco recognised that the same erosion was possible in himself, and in the men he could see around him who were struggling in ways they had no real language or space for.

This is not an unusual pattern. There is an interpersonal theory of suicide which identifies two primary psychological risk factors: thwarted belonging — the felt sense that one does not belong anywhere, that one's connections are hollow — and perceived burdensomeness — the belief that one is a burden to others and that they would be better off without you. Both of these states can develop slowly, invisibly, in men who are outwardly functional, professionally successful, and socially unremarkable. The crisis, when it comes, often surprises everyone except the man who has been quietly carrying it for years.

What Pasco did in the wake of that loss was, at first, instinctive. He gathered a group of his friends online and proposed that they choose a subject and go a little deeper into it. He experienced his first proper Men's Circle shortly after, facilitated by a friend from Ibiza, and recognised something in the format that he had not previously had a name for. During lockdown, when they could meet outside, he brought those same friends together in a London park and began facilitating. He had no formal training at that point — what he had was community leadership experience, a journalist's instinct for the question underneath the question, and a clear-eyed recognition of what he had nearly lost through not asking for help himself.

I find this thread compelling because it is the opposite of how most organisations in this space are built. Pasco did not start with a model. He started with a grief, a recognition, and a question: what if there had been somewhere for those men to go?

That question turned out to be both personal and architectural. In a previous episode of *Don't Let The Old Man In*, I spoke with a man who had come back from the edge of suicide and described the same absence Pasco is describing — not a shortage of care from the people around him, but a shortage of honest space. The two conversations rhyme in a way that I think matters.

2. From Awareness to Acceptance to Agency: The Architecture of Inner Work

One of the things that most impressed me about Pasco's approach is how structured it actually is beneath the surface. Men's Circles can look, from the outside, like a group of blokes sitting around talking. And in one sense, that is exactly what they are. But the format Pasco has developed over five years moves men through three distinct stages — awareness, acceptance, and agency — that mirror the broader arc of meaningful personal change. Pasco is explicit about this. He does not want men rushing to the action stage, which is what men instinctively want to do, before they have actually done the harder work of understanding what is going on and coming to terms with it.

The awareness stage involves men telling their own life story, often in the third person. Pasco grew up near Bristol. That linguistic distance, slight as it sounds, creates just enough separation for a man to hear his own story as a story — with a shape, a logic, a set of formative moments — rather than simply as the water he swims in. Many men, Pasco observes, have never told their story aloud. Not the full version. Not the honest version. The act of articulating it, in front of men who are actually listening rather than waiting for their turn to speak, is itself transformative. It is the beginning of being known.

This maps with surprising precision onto **James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model of behaviour change**, which identifies pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, and action as the stages through which genuine change moves. The research finding that most interventions fail is largely a finding about timing: people are pushed into action before the contemplation and preparation work has been done. Pasco has essentially built a container that paces men through contemplation before action, which is the opposite of what most self-help culture — and certainly the Manosphere — offers. The Manosphere sells action, urgency, and certainty. Men's Circles sell slowness, honesty, and ambiguity. It is a much harder sell. And it is the one that works.

I have seen this arc — **awareness, acceptance, agency** — described in different language across many of the conversations I have had on this podcast.

Stephen Keys, in our recent episode, described it as the journey from the persona he carried to the person he actually was.

Craig Williams described it as the difference between performing strength and actually developing it.



What Pasco has done is take that arc and make it practical, scalable, and repeatable — week after week, for men anywhere in the world who are willing to show up.

Experiment

Choose one area of your life — relationships, career, health, or sense of purpose — and apply the three-stage lens honestly. Ask yourself: What am I currently aware of here that I have not yet fully accepted? What am I accepting about myself that I have not yet taken action on? And if you are at the action stage, is the action you are taking actually addressing the root of the thing, or is it a way of staying busy so you do not have to sit with what you already know? Write one honest sentence in response to each of those questions.

3. Brave Spaces, Not Safe Spaces

Pasco is careful, as I am, about the phrase safe space. Not because safety does not matter — it does, enormously, particularly for men who have spent decades being penalised for honesty — but because the word can quietly undercut what is actually being asked. What a Men's Circle actually asks of a man is courage. The courage to speak honestly about what is happening inside him. The courage to hear other men do the same without deflecting, advising, or making a joke. The courage to sit with discomfort rather than resolving it prematurely. That is not safe work. It is brave work. And the distinction matters.

Tim Hewson, who set up Mongrel's Men in Australia — a guest and an organisation I have spoken about with deep admiration on this podcast — uses exactly this language: brave spaces, not safe spaces. The framing shifts the burden from the facilitator's obligation to protect to the participant's willingness to engage. You are not being kept safe. You are choosing to be courageous. That shift in framing changes something for men. It is an invitation to the arena, not a guarantee of comfort inside it.

What creates the conditions for that bravery — and this is one of the most interesting parts of what Pasco describes — is not safety in the abstract but a very specific set of agreements: confidentiality, sobriety, not interrupting, not



fixing or solving another man's problems. These agreements create a container tight enough that a man can risk something inside it. And the critical ingredient, the one Pasco returns to repeatedly, is the facilitator modelling the behaviour. When the facilitator — a trained, experienced man — allows himself to feel something, to go somewhere honest in front of the group, it gives every other man in the room permission to follow. This is the mechanism. Not inspiration, not instruction. Modelling.

Brené Brown's research on vulnerability and shame is the academic frame that sits closest to this. Brown's central finding — that vulnerability is not weakness but the precondition for belonging, creativity, and meaningful connection — is exactly what men discover in a circle. The surprise is rarely the depth of the conversation. The surprise is the relief. The realisation that other men are carrying the same weight, that the isolation was not a personal failing but a structural one, that the armour was optional. That relief, as Pasco puts it, is where the real work begins.

4. The Adult-Adult Principle: The Radical Act of Meeting as Equals

One of the principles underpinning Men's Circles that I had not encountered before this conversation is what Pasco calls the adult-adult dynamic, drawn from Eric Berne's transactional analysis framework, developed in the 1960s and still remarkably relevant. The idea is straightforward in its description and surprisingly difficult in its practice: inside a circle, every man leaves his title, his income, his professional status, and his age-related authority at the door. The 25-year-old and the 68-year-old meet as equals. Not as if they are the same — they are not — but as if each carries something worth hearing. The facilitator participates. He does not preside.

Berne identified three ego states — parent, adult, and child — and observed that most social interaction defaults into hierarchical patterns: the boss and the employee, the expert and the novice, the government and the citizen. Adult-child dynamics are so pervasive that we barely notice them. We were trained into them at school, where we spent twelve or more years listening and being told what was true. We reinforced them in workplaces organised around authority and compliance. And then we wonder why men in their 50s find it almost impossible to say I don't know, or I was wrong, or I need help. Those three sentences are sentences a child says to a parent. In an adult-adult dynamic, they are simply honesty.



Pasco's point about **admitting fault** is one of the most practically useful things in this conversation, and I have been thinking about it since we spoke. He says — and I find this both true and underrated — that the ability to quickly take responsibility for your mistakes is one of the most powerful relational tools available to a man. Not grovelling. Not self-flagellation. Just: I got that wrong, and I'm sorry. It ends the conflict. It builds the bridge. And for men who have been conditioned to equate admitting fault with losing — to see every conversation as a territory to be defended — it is a genuinely countercultural act.

I shared a story in our conversation about a man I had once taught in a corporate programme around conflict. He came back six months later and told me it was the best course he had ever attended. When I asked why, he said: the better I get at admitting I'm wrong when I am wrong, the better my relationship with my partner is. In every dimension. That is both funny and completely serious. It is also a near-perfect illustration of what the adult-adult principle looks like when it migrates from the circle into the rest of a man's life. Which is, of course, the whole point.

5. Intergenerational Wisdom: The Gold Dust That Flows Both Ways

One of the richest threads in my conversation with Pasco is the question of what different generations of men can actually offer each other — and why that exchange has become so rare. Pasco describes his weekly conversations with his 95-year-old grandfather as a model for what this can look like: they choose a subject together, speak for half an hour, and trade perspectives across seven decades of lived experience. Neither instructs the other. Both leave with something they did not arrive with. That is not a small thing. That is the kind of intergenerational exchange that used to happen naturally in communities and has, quietly, almost disappeared.

I reflected on this in our conversation through the lens of a mentor I had in my own professional life — a man about 25 years older than me who had a habit of answering my questions not with answers, but with the phrase: I used to. I used to do it that way. It was infuriating at first. I had come for the answer. But over time I realised that his answer was taking me somewhere more valuable than the one I had originally asked for. It was opening a conversation about why he had changed, what he had learned, what the cost of the original approach had been. I walked away from those conversations never with the answer to the question I had asked, but with a kind of wisdom I could not have constructed on my own. I am starting to catch myself, now in my mid-50s, doing the same



thing. I used to. Because of course, at certain stages of life, things that once worked simply no longer do.

Pasco is explicit about the particular value that midlife men — men in their 40s, 50s, and 60s — bring to circles as facilitators. Not because older is wiser in any automatic sense, but because a man who has navigated divorce, career change, bereavement, the departure of children, and the quiet renegotiation of identity that the second half of life demands has a quality of groundedness that younger men cannot yet have. He has been through enough to know that most crises are survivable, that most certainties are temporary, and that the most useful thing you can offer another man in distress is not an answer but a grounded question. That is a skill that accrues with age, if — and this is the critical if — a man has been willing to learn from what has happened to him rather than simply enduring it.

The research on mentoring and intergenerational connection reinforces this from the other direction. Studies consistently show that older adults who engage in active mentoring relationships report significantly higher levels of purpose and wellbeing than those who do not. This is not a minor finding. For men who reach their 50s and 60s and find themselves wondering what the second half of life is actually for — after the career has plateaued, the children have left, the accumulation phase has done most of what it can — the answer may be sitting in a circle with a 29-year-old who is quietly lost, asking the kind of question that only



// DON'T DO LIFE ALONE. IT'S A TEAM GAME. //

PASCO ASHTON
FOUNDER
MEN'S CIRCLE

DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN

The graphic features a portrait of Pasco Ashton on the left. The background is dark blue with a bright blue border. The text is in white and orange. There are green double-slash symbols on either side of the main headline. A small logo in the bottom right corner consists of a white speech bubble containing the text 'DON'T LET THE OLD MAN IN' and a blue 'W' symbol.

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