

1960s Mad Men Are Today's Icarus Men

By Barbara R. Kirwin, Ph.D.

On March 25th at 9/8c, AMC's groundbreaking drama *Mad Men* will resume and, though set in the 1960s, it is oddly evocative of the world we live in today. The show opens with a silhouetted figure of a man in a business suit, tumbling in free fall from the summit of a skyscraper, passing incongruous glossy ad images of happy families, new cars and red-lipped women on his way down. As a psychologist, I am struck by how aptly this image of a mid-20th century Icarus evokes the 21st century phenomenon I see every day in my practice: the epidemic of over-achieving men who spectacularly fall from grace.

The show is so compelling not just because of its stylishness or good writing but because its characters resonate for us today. In *Mad Men*'s Don Draper we see the forerunner of such fallen Icarus Men as Anthony Weiner, John Edwards, Tiger Woods, and Eliot Spitzer.

I have treated dozens of Don Drapers in the last three years—men referred to me by their attorneys or the courts after their arrests for scandalous crimes involving sex or fiscal fraud. Some men have embezzled money from their companies and been caught by the FBI. Others have stalked former girlfriends or mistresses, or paid them off using company money. Others have become so addicted to cocaine or gambling they destroyed their businesses and reputations. No diagnostic category pinpoints the exact nature of what I have come to call the Icarus Complex—which often means these tragic men fail to get help before they crash and burn.

Today's Icarus Man, like Draper, is relentlessly driven by his own demons. He purchases his success at an enormous emotional, psychological and spiritual price. Like the men I treat in my practice, Draper can never rest on his laurels--as evidenced by his uneasiness at the Clio awards and in how he forgets the statuette at the bar. Draper feels like a fraud because he *is* a fraud. The Icarus Men that I treat have all reached the pinnacle of their professions, garnering accolades and handsome salaries and bonuses. Yet it is as if they, like Draper, are haunted by the humiliating and abusive treatment they received in childhood from cruel and selfish or distant fathers. They construct a faux-self, much as Draper has actually done, to defend against this pain. As one patient said to me as he was awaiting trial for a currency trading Ponzi scheme that netted him mega millions, "I know I'm not smart or handsome --just average --but when I meet a potential client, I take control -- I become another person."

To manage his stress, Draper resorts to the classic schemes that all Icarus Men employ. He drinks to the point of having blackouts; he is a workaholic; and he engages in compulsive and indiscriminant sexual affairs. He tries to manage his fragmented life by compartmentalizing—even as the boundaries blur between his debonair work persona and his desperate sexual predation. The latter-day Don Drapers I see in my office do the same thing, like the happily married, high-powered partner in a prestigious law firm who harassed a woman he met through craigslist personals with e-mail demands for nude pictures.

A key to understanding the Icarus Complex is that its victims will sell their souls to defend against feelings of being irrelevant, unloved, unwanted and second best. Ironically, the contemporary Icarus Man, like Draper, deceives himself far more than he deceives others in leading his double life. He is incapable of genuine intimacy and deep commitment—a legacy of

his abusive childhood, although he is deeply committed to being the “perfect” father, thus overcompensating for the lack of a close paternal relationship.

Like his modern-day counterpart, Draper is emotionally isolated and repressed. His marriage to Betty was as unreal and glossy as his ad campaigns. The only true emotion he showed was with Anna, the wife of the man whose identity he has assumed. Yet he had to keep her safely a continent and a secret away. He also de-sexualized her, turning her into a mother figure, as do Icarus Men with their wives.

Don Draper is estranged from his past, his family, his own feelings and his inner self. He breaks down in tears in front of his coworker Peggy when he learns of Anna’s death. She remains with him in the office throughout the night, cradling his sobbing head in her arms. But in the morning, she is exhausted and spent while Don is restored, bright and ready to work. Draper must live in the expedient present where all it takes to recover is a close shave, a morning scotch and a clean white shirt. But he will certainly find there is a cost to that false resilience.

Mad Men is set in a time when there was an impenetrable boundary between public and personal lives, with a wink and a nod approach to men behaving badly. (Witness how the sexual transgressions of John F. Kennedy, the president in the early *Mad Men* era, were indulged and ignored.) The competitive pressures on Draper and the other *Mad Men* are counterbalanced by the tension relievers of chain-smoking, incessant office drinking and compulsive skirt-chasing, along with martini-lunches at all the best restaurants. Nevertheless, the prognosis for Don Draper is not good. Will Don Draper indeed be the man in the gray flannel suit plummeting to earth from the top floor of his office building?

Or will it be Roger Sterling, the suave silver-haired senior partner who ferociously competes with Don in chain-smoking, drunken binges and womanizing? Roger has already tried

to best Don by washing down bushels of oysters with scotch chasers only to collapse in a pool of vomit in front of prospective clients. Nevertheless, in a mid-life plummet, he has abandoned his faithful wife and given his heart already damaged by a coronary to a flighty gold-digger. Will he beat Don to the self-destructive precipice?

Perhaps young, brash and conniving Pete will beat them both. His ascent has been more meteoric and he has much to prove to himself—including saving face in front of his overpowering father-in-law and healing the emotional wounds inflicted by his critical and demanding father and distant mother.

For our Don Drapers, drinking on company time, much less sporting a full service office bar, would be grounds for dismissal or a twelve-step intervention. Most egregiously Don Draper's sexual conduct would have landed him in jail several times over. His tying up and ravishing of his erstwhile mistress Bobbi would constitute date rape; his violent grabbing of her crotch at the restaurant would be sexual assault. A modern day scorned employee like Allison would most likely press sexual harassment charges. Today's Icarus Men keep their crises private—until they endure a public fall.

Another of my patients, a well-respected financial planner, expertly and honestly managed a client's estate for 20 years until his beloved mother died. Unable to contain his grief, he soon found that his recreational gambling had become compulsive. In order to settle his debts with his impatient and menacing bookies, he bilked the elderly woman out of her life-savings.

Many of the Icarus Men who I see in my practice have destroyed their careers and ruined their reputations by the very behaviors that Don Draper uses to enhance his mystique. Today, Draper would be arrested, smeared all over tabloids, and classified an alcoholic and a sex-offender.

Society has little tolerance for Mad Men nowadays. But their inheritors, the Icarus Men, still fly high, full of public swagger and private horrors, until they plunge to earth. By recognizing them while they are still airborne, we can help Don Draper's sons seek the help they need before they fall.